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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Arbeitspapier / working paper

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Kloc-Nowak, W., & Timoszuk, S. (2021). *Flying granny, skyping grandpa? Grandparenting across geographical distance and national borders*. (CMR Spotlight, 1 (24)). Warsaw: University of Warsaw, Centre of Migration Research (CMR). <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-79548-6>

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No. 1 (24), January 2021

Flying granny, skyping grandpa? Grandparenting across geographical distance and national borders

Do distance and national borders make a difference in grandparents' relation and communication practices with their grandchildren? Is transnational grandparenthood a unique phenomenon? Research on diverse types of grandparental care and virtual co-presence in transnational families suggests migrants and their parents have mastered the ways to care at a distance. However, what does it actually mean? In this issue of CMR Spotlight Weronika Kloc-Nowak and Sylwia Timoszuk outline some results of the 2019-2020 nationwide survey which puts 'flying granny' and 'skyping grandpa' tropes in the context of Polish families.



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Weronika Kloc-Nowak and Sylwia Timoszuk

Introduction

Longer life expectancy and lower fertility mean that grandparents live often late into their grandchildren's adulthood. At the same time, there are fewer grandchildren per grandparental couple. Both of these phenomena – characteristic for the contemporary 'beanpole' family – require investing more in grandparent-grandchild relationships, which may last for many years (i.a. [Bengtson, 2001](#)). Spatial mobility of parents with their children and of adult grandchildren affects the maintenance of a good grandparental relationship. It demands more grandparents' agency and higher mobility at later ages ([Baldassar & Merla, 2014](#)).

Scholars of transnational families developed multiple categories of migrant family practices. Examples include: caring at a distance, virtual co-presence, or grandparents on the move ([Baldassar, Baldock, & Wilding, 2007](#); [Baldassar, Nedelcu, Merla, & Wilding, 2016](#); [Nedelcu & Wyss, 2019](#)). In our research, we apply these categories to families separated through internal migration.

[Baldassar & Merla \(2014\)](#) argue that the ideas of mobility and absence are inherent features of family lives in the full range of family forms. Importantly, this applies to domestic

migrations as well. Distance is a feature that unites internal and international mobility. This is true especially within the EU, where the geographic span of internal and international mobility may be similar and means of international travel may be even more efficient than for internal journeys. Hence our aim was to study the role of distance in family practices and in the maintenance of intergenerational ties in both internationally and internally mobile families.

Our case is Poland, where the society combines strong intergenerational and family care obligations, expressed as social norms and legal duties. Poles adhere to these norms despite intense outmigration and rapid population ageing ([Okólski, 2018](#)). The population of grandparents in Poland is estimated at 9.5 million (for 2015, based on the Survey of Health Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) - [Myck et al. 2017](#), and Statistics Poland data). Over 57% of Polish grandparents look after their grandchildren, at least occasionally ([Neuberger & Haberkern, 2014](#)). In Poland 20% of people aged 65+ reside with their grandchildren in the same household (based on [Szatur-Jaworska, 2012](#)). Looking at minor grandchildren only, over 253 thousands children of Polish nationality live

abroad (as of 2011, [Kaczorowski, 2015](#)), most probably away from their grandparents.

Data

We conducted a CAPI survey of grandparents aged 50+ living in Poland. The data collection took place in late December 2019 and January 2020, on a nationwide sample recruited in randomly drawn addresses, covering 1000 respondents. The structure of the sample was controlled for gender and size of settlement to reflect the structure of the Polish population aged 50 years or more.

The sample consisted of three groups of grandparents: (1) those whose grandchildren live only in close proximity, (2) those who also have grandchildren in distant locations in Poland (over 25 km away), and (3) grandparents with at least one grandchild abroad – a highly novel approach within the current state-of-the-art in the research on intergenerational relations. The distant (2) and transnational (3) grandparents (whose proportion in the general population we do not know) subsamples were boosted in order to achieve three groups of comparable size. The survey sample should not be treated as representative for the population of grandparents in Poland as a whole. The important advantage of our database is that we have a relatively high share of people in their 70s (18%) and even aged 80+ (12%). It allows for a unique analysis of the oldest old, who are difficult to reach respondents. Thanks to that, we can analyze the grandparents’ relationships with both young and adult grandchildren (aged 0-49 years).

The data can be analyzed using different units of analysis, among others: a grandparent

(N=1000) or a grandparent-grandchild dyad within its family context (basic data for N=1975 grandchildren, detailed for N=1674). Thanks to migration-oriented questions, the survey design allows for a systematic comparison of family relationships and practices in transnational and internally mobile families. This makes the data very unique and information rich, even in comparison with big international databases like [SHARE](#) and [Generations and Gender Survey](#).

Results

The survey captured complex family configurations. Since respondents were asked to list all their grandchildren in different locations, the database allows to compare activities, communication patterns, transfers and grandparents’ perception of relationship quality with their grandchildren, differentiated by the place of residence on two dimensions: distance and within the country/abroad.

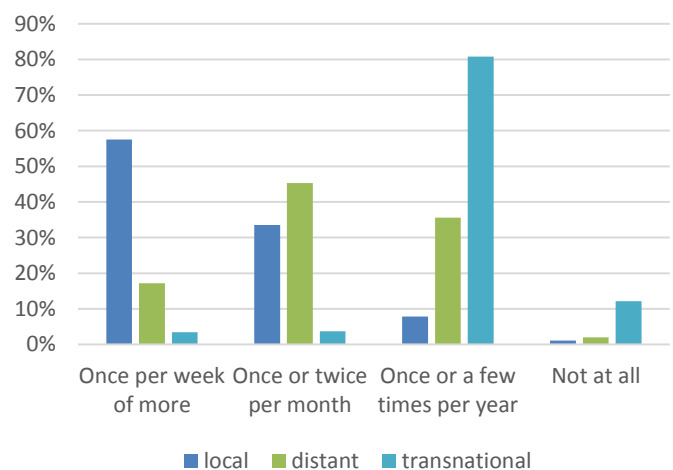


Fig 1. Frequency of in person meetings in the last 12 months with grandchildren depending on their location
Source: Grandparents survey 2020, N=1674

As expected, distance and (even more) national borders, reduce the frequency of contact with grandchildren (Fig 1). In the last 12 months (corresponding roughly to the year 2019) the grandparents met with over half of the grandchildren who live within 25 km range (“local”) at least once per week. With the grandchildren living in Poland but further than 25 km (“distant”), the most popular declarations were once or twice per month. In contrast, the grandparents met only once or a few times in the last 12 months with a majority of grandchildren residing abroad. They did not meet face to face with 12% of the transnational grandchildren.

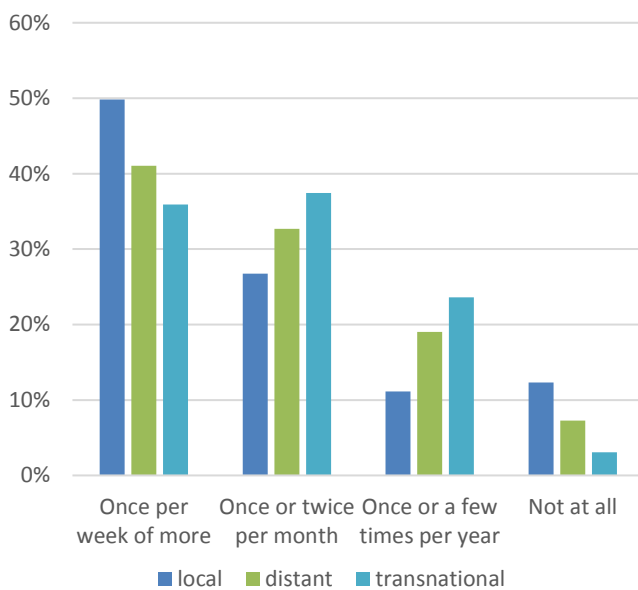


Fig 2. Frequency of remote contact in the last 12 months with grandchildren depending on their location
 Source: Grandparents survey 2020, N=1529 (Missing data on remote conversations for 145 youngest grandchildren)

On the other hand, the distance and national borders affected less the frequency of a remote contact, defined as conversations

using phone or online communicators (Fig 2). The grandparents had remote conversations most often with the local grandchildren (50%). Interestingly, declaration of no such contact was the highest also in the local group (12%). Proximity may create the need for communication via phone or online communicators for some, but for others it would be superfluous – especially those co-residing with their grandchildren. Calling each other very frequently was the least frequent among transnational dyads. The most popular frequency of communicating with grandchildren abroad was once or twice per month (37%). If the grandparents have grandchildren in multiple locations, the ones living closer can be called more often, to provide regular support, while conversations with the ones living away and abroad happen less frequently.

We hypothesised that the experience of ‘doing family’ transnationally may affect grandparents’ practices also with regards to the relatives in Poland. For example, it can contribute to the readiness to use remote conversations (by phone or online communicators) with grandchildren remaining in Poland. Focusing our attention only on the grandchildren living in Poland, we study whether grandparents’ practices differ depending on whether they also have contact with other grandchildren abroad.

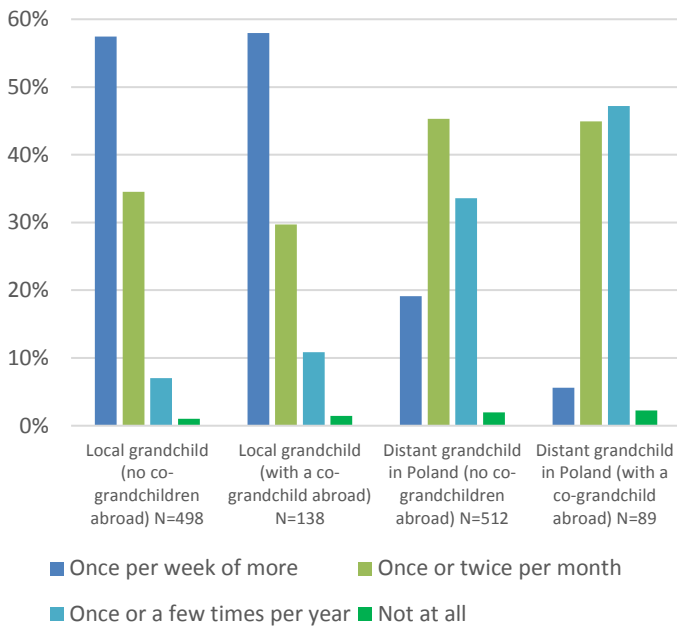


Fig 3. Frequency of in person meetings in the last 12 months with grandchildren in Poland - grandparents with and without other grandchildren abroad
Source: Grandparents survey 2020, N=1674

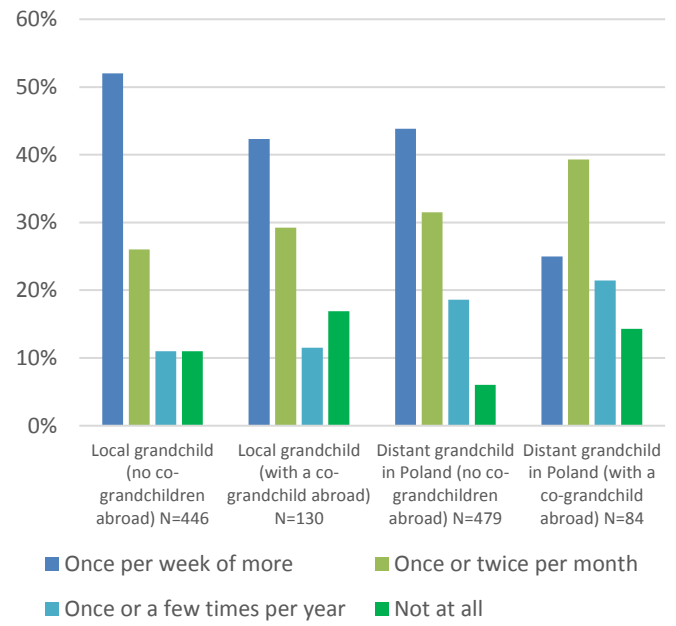


Fig 4. Frequency of remote contact in the last 12 months with grandchildren in Poland - grandparents with and without other grandchildren abroad
Source: Grandparents survey 2020, N=1529

Looking at Figures 3 and 4, it seems that having another grandchild(ren) abroad has little effect on the frequency of contact with local grandchildren. But as regards contact with the distant grandchildren, for those who share the grandparents with cousins (or sibling) abroad, the meeting frequency is lower. Interestingly, similar results are observed for both face to face and remote contact frequencies. There might be two alternative explanations of this. On the one hand, it may be a result of competition for grandparents' time. On the other, it is a consequence of lower associational solidarity in families prone to migrate both internally and internationally. When asked about the obstacles in maintaining contact with their grandchildren (Fig 5), the most common problems for the

grandparents of transnational grandchildren were: not speaking the language of the grandchild's country of residence (47%) and travel cost (42%). Interestingly, only 6% of grandparents pointed to the problem of the grandchild from abroad not speaking Polish.

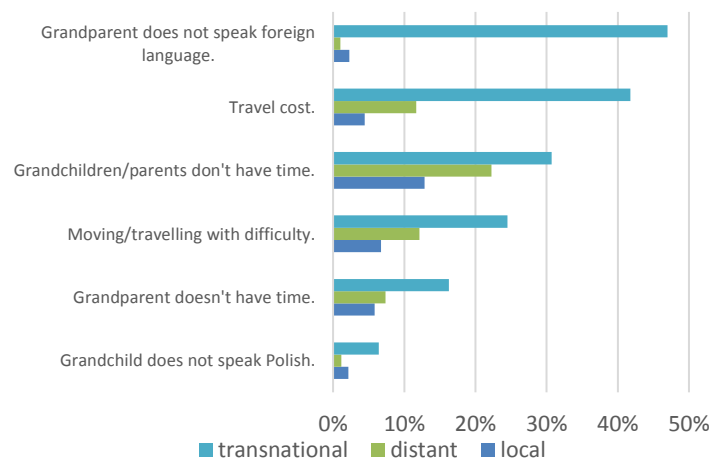


Fig 5. Obstacles in maintaining contact with grandchildren
Source: Grandparents survey 2020, N=1975

This suggests that for grandparents the language barrier concerns traveling abroad rather than not understanding their grandchildren. In local and distant groups the most common obstacle for grandparents was the fact that grandchildren or their parents did not have enough time (13% for local and 22% for distant grandchildren).

We also asked our respondents to evaluate the quality of the relationship with particular grandchildren on several dimensions (on 1-5 Likert scale). Relationships with local grandchildren stand out on the dimension of “having exceptionally close bond” (38% of grandparents strongly agree with this statement, compared to 25% of such answers for both distant and transnational grandchildren), and “understanding each other well” (37% of grandparents strongly agree with this statement for local grandchildren, compared to 24% for both distant and transnational). In contrast, the difference on the dimension of “being treated with appropriate respect” was not significant. Relationships with grandchildren living abroad stood out on the dimension of “missing the grandchild”: grandparents declared missing them every day in 46% cases.

Conclusions

Meeting in-person at least once per year could be observed in a vast majority of the grandparent-grandchild dyads. However, the survey was conducted before the Covid-19 pandemic. It is possible that this picture changed in 2020, as social isolation and travel bans may have deprived families of even that one meeting per year.

As suspected, the grandchildren’s location affects in-person contact frequency. The bigger the distance, the lower the frequency – with national borders acting as an additional barrier. The most frequent remote contact (once per week or more) was the most popular for both local and distant grandchildren, but not for the ones abroad. At least among grandparents, remote communication and virtual co-presence are not as ubiquitous in transnational families as claimed by migration scholars. Paradoxically, having transnational families may contribute to lower use of ICT-mediated communication also with non-migrant relatives, as having grandchildren abroad cooccurs with a lower frequency of remote contact with the ones in Poland, compared to the grandparents without such transnational ties.

Travelling to maintain contact with grandchildren abroad requires overcoming economic and linguistic barriers, which calls for special assistance of the migrant family members. However (declared) lack of time to invest in family relationships is a more general problem in the eyes of the grandparents. While contact frequencies with distant-within-country grandchildren are usually located in between the local and transnational ones, on certain dimensions the relationships with them were evaluated very similarly to the ones abroad. This suggests that emotional closeness and mutual understanding may suffer due to distance alone, regardless of whether the respondent’s family lives abroad or not.

We completed our survey just before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe. Lockdown measures and self-isolation have affected family practices heavily, even among

the spatially close kin members. Hence, the current way of 'doing family' even at little geographical distance has most probably transformed. In order to understand how, we continue our inquiry in the pandemic, using focus group interviews with Polish grandmothers and grandfathers.

The analysed survey has been conducted in the framework of the project „Grandparenting at a distance - beliefs and practices regarding relationship with grandchildren in spatially mobile Polish families”. Funding: National Science Centre, Poland, HARMONIA 10 grant number 2018/30/M/HS6/00279, Principal Investigator: Weronika Kloc-Nowak.



Weronika Kloc-Nowak, PhD

Qualitative sociologist with a PhD in Political and Social Sciences from the European University Institute, Florence, Italy. In her research Weronika specialises in the dynamics of migrant families, care and intergenerational relations, as well as gender perspective in migration studies. Her research concentrates on the impact of out-migration and return migration on the norms, intentions and practices regarding family relations in Poland. Weronika is also chair of the CMR Ethics Committee.



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Graduated from Warsaw School of Economics (SGH) and the European Doctoral School of Demography organised by Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research and SGH. Sylwia currently works as a researcher at the Institute of Statistics and Demography, SGH. She is a gerontologist with skills and experience in conducting both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Her current research focuses mainly on the financial aspects of widowhood in older age and childless older people. She is also interested in the socioeconomic dimension of the population ageing process.

Keywords:

grandparents / grandchildren / migrants / Poland

Suggested citation: Kloc-Nowak W., Timoszuk S., 2021. *Flying granny, skyping grandpa? Grandparenting across geographical distance and national borders*. CMR Spotlight, 1(24).

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Editors of CMR Spotlight: Michał Nowosielski, Dominika Pszczołkowska

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