

Remarried Families: Under the View of Grandparents

Emily Schuler, Cristina Maria de Souza Brito Dias

Universidade Católica de Pernambuco, Recife, Brazil
Email: schuler.mily@gmail.com

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Abstract

The remarried family comes from a previous separation, by one or both partners, creating a new union that leads to the needs of adaption and shaping of new relationships among its members. Being it a time of transition, most often, grandparents are present, providing emotional and instrumental support to their children and grandchildren. This study therefore aimed to understand how the grandparents perceive and experience the remarriage of their children. The participants were nine grandmothers and one grandfather, aged between 48 and 83 years. They answered a semi-structured interview that was analyzed according to Thematic Content Analysis. The results showed a large involvement of grandparents in the remarriages of children, contributing to the adjustment of grandchildren to this new family. Acceptance and support for the choice of the children proved to be essential to achieve a sense of family among all those involved in this system.

Keywords

Family Remarried, Grandparents, Intergenerational Relationship

1. Introduction

This paper observes nowadays the increase of families, which are composed, decomposed and then recomposed. Garbar and Theodore (2000) point out that these “new families” are made up of parents, stepparents, children, stepchildren, grandparents and step grandparents that form sets that look like a mosaic. There are several classifications to name this new family, like blended, mosaic, rebuilt, restructured, reconstituted, mixed, remarried, among others. In this article we chose the terminology remarried because it is based upon a new union, formal or informal, between partners. The remarried family is increasing its significance in Brazil and worldwide, since, according to Waldemar (1996), most of which were separated remarry in search of a new family construction setting new relationship patterns. It is also the building of a new conjugality that involves a reorganization of the

emotional, social, and economic levels (Freitas, Silva, & Bridges, 2012). Gabar and Theodore (2009) report that the successive marriages are becoming more frequent and “put a whole series of problems together such as, practical problems, legal, economic and psychological as much for children as for adults” (p. 163).

In the formation of this new family Fernandes (2006) states that many characters start co-existing, which allows flexibility in the interactions that can be either enriching or disturbing. It is a complex adaptation process, which may require the support of the extended family. According to Araújo and Dias (2002) the support provided by grandparents to their grandchildren in times of crisis becomes fundamental, it being from emotional nature (giving affection, guidance, talk) as also instrumental support (providing financial support, caring, perform household chores).

However, in Brazil, there is still little research focusing on the extended family in the remarriage process, focusing more on the spouses and children (Amaral & Dias, 2011; Cano, Gabarra, Moré & Crepaldi, 2009; Costa & Dias, 2012; Valentine & de Souza Dias, 2014). Therefore, it is important to understand the impact generated in the grandparents as a result of remarriage of their children, thereby justifying this study.

The remarried family comes necessarily from a previous separation on the part of one or both spouses that involved three generations (Gladstone, 1987). After the spouses and their children, grandparents are the relatives who tend to be more sensitive to the consequences of the separation; since they engage in the very delicate moment their children are going through (Araújo & Dias, 2002). Because they are already in a more stable phase in their lives, grandparents can provide an emotional and instrumental assistance to children and grandchildren, playing an active role in the process (Johnson, 1988). Hall and Kruk (1995) explain that grandparents play a key role in helping their grandchildren to be adjusted to the consequences of divorce, providing a haven for the emotional needs when parents are unable to provide such support.

The reinvestment in this new marriage union favors the appearance of new family subsystems of which the grandparents also become part. Men and women need to reconcile a range of potentially conflicting relationships: offspring of different unions, the new marital relationship, the permanence of the contact the ex-partner due to the children and, we would add, the acceptance or rejection by of the families of origin (Cano, Gabarra, Moré, & Crepaldi, 2009). It is worth highlighting, as reported by Visser and Visser (1988), the remarried family is constituted from losses, so they need to be recognized and also elaborated. The construction of this new family structure through the new union involves conceiving the family in other ways, according to a wide possibility of rearrangements.

Faced with these reorganization challenges, grandparents can act as facilitators in the adaptation of new family members, as well obstruct it, to demonstrate loyalty to old sons in law or daughters. As grandparents themselves are an important source of support in the divorce process, it becomes necessary to consider what their role is in the remarriage process of their children. Through greater participation in the life of their grandchildren, grandparents influence several areas of their lives: emotional, educational, social, formation of values and character grandchildren. They are seen as integral members of the family network that give emotional and instrumental support, not just grandchildren but also the children, which can be critical in the process of these remarriage.

The relationship established between grandparents, parents and grandchildren could be used as a means to develop skills in all members, serving mainly of support for the youngest (Pinto & Rodrigues, 2006). Cardoso (2011) argues that family cooperation becomes of fundamental importance, since each generation has a specific role with duties and obligations. Grandparents can then assume the role agents of socialization movement in the family, having their presence intensified in family relationships. “The role of grandparents today seems to be sometimes both, the affection and supply economic conditions to grandchildren” (p. 103). It is therefore an affective and close relationship with their grandchildren, facilitated by the increasingly constant presence in the family serving as support for the younger ones. Block (2002) points out the importance of intergenerational relationship; because when family members are in need of support, often they seek out their generations, when their own generation does not have enough resources. According to the author, it is a kind of two-way path, where grandchildren serve as support for the grandparents, and the grandparents to the grandchildren.

Lussier, Deater-deackard, Dunn and Davies (2002) found that a greater closeness between grandparents and grandchildren during the process of divorce and remarriage results in a more natural transition. Grandparents can then become an intermediate bridge between generations and between the new members of the remarried family, as noted Gladstone (1989). In his research with grandparents whose children had remarried, the author came to the conclusion that geographical distance is an important factor to facilitate visits between grandparents

and grandchildren, but it may be mediated through their children. The role of parents in organizing meetings and visits is essential, since they serve as mediators for the contact. Thus grandparents can keep contact with the grandchildren after remarriage. Some felt more comfortable to visit their grandchildren when they were with their children, and not with the former spouse. There are cases where the contact is difficult, especially when the grandchildren were not the children of their grandparents when there needs to be another mediator. In such cases it may occur that grandparents do not have the permission to see their grandchildren. Gladstone (1989) adds that the contact is mediated more easily when grandparents adopt a stance of non-interference with the new couple. Non-interference is also cited by Araújo and Dias (2002) to conclude that it is the key to a good contact with children and grandchildren; only give advice when asked, helping thus without interfering. It can be concluded that the relationship grandparents have with their children is interconnected with the grandparents-grandchildren relationship (Gladstone, 1989). Block (2002) reports that the grandparent and grandchild relationship, most often, is a close relationship, since many grandchildren feel more comfortable to talk about important issues with grandparents than with their parents.

It may be that the grandparents join the former son or daughter in law hindering the process of adaptation required on remarriage. However, a good relationship with former in laws, as well as with new spouses, is considered beneficial, in addition to facilitating access to their grandchildren. Another phenomenon that can occur would be a preference to the grandchildren by blood, and this may be a way to distinguish the stepchildren of the children. Gladstone (1989) found a minority of these cases, being the most grandparents proactive in their relationship with the middle generation (children), seeking to be a supportive resource. Thus, it was possible to consolidate and strengthen their roles within the family.

Therefore, the importance of the role of grandparents in the remarriage process of their children is observed. Block (2002) emphasizes the need to go beyond the nuclear family, stimulating interaction between the generations, with a view to the benefit of all. One must include the grandparents in the family reconstruction process, encouraging their involvement because they can act as mediators between the family members. The author also suggests specific assistance for grandparents remarriage, for surely they can enrich the lives of their grandchildren as much biological as acquired, and be active members in their family system, maximizing intergenerational solidarity.

Given the above, the general objective of this research was to understand how the grandparents perceive and experience the remarriage of their children. Specifically it aims to: identify the changes occurred; the possible facilitating factors and originators of conflict in remarriage process of their children; relate the feelings experienced and needs felt; characterize the process of adapting the grandparents to the remarriage of their child; analyze how they deal with conflict that may exist between their children and their grandchildren at the time of remarriage; the relationship with the new partner of their child and step grandchildren that might enter the family.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were nine grandmothers and one grandfather whose children remarried. It was used as inclusion criteria the fact of living in the same city as their children and grandchildren, so that the relationship does not suffer interference from the geographical distance, as they should also have remarried children for the first time for at least two years, due a consensual or litigious separation. The age of participants ranged from 48 to 83 years, being the average 64.1 years. Most are retired and have completed high school. Only one participant has a grandson fruit of the son's remarriage. The mean time of remarriage of children was 2.8 years. To preserve its identity, the names used herein are fictitious. These data are exposed in Table 1.

2.2. Instrument

For data collection a semi-structured interview was used, composed by thirteen questions consistent with the research objectives, as well as a questionnaire with the demographic data of the participants. According to Minayo (2004), the interview guides a conversation with purpose, serving as a facilitator of opening, broadening and deepening of communication. The sociodemographic questionnaire included the following data: age, gender, education, marital status, occupation, religion, number of children, number of grandchildren, son remarriage time, number of grandchildren by the son remarried, existence of stepchildren by that children.

Table 1. Social demographic data.

Participant	Age	Civil Status	Education	Occupation	Time of Remarriage of Children
Roberta	63	Married	Bachelor	Teacher	4 years
Marluce	65	Widow	High School	Retired	3 years
Elaine	48	Divorced	High School	Social Services	2 years
Pamela	61	Married	High School	Retired	2 years
Natalia	59	Single	High School	Saleswoman	2 years
Mathew	68	Married	High School	Retired	2 years
Sandra	67	Married	High School	Retired	2 years
Valerie	83	Widow	Middle School	Retired	5 years
Danielle	62	Married	Middle School	Retired	2 years
Nora	65	Married	Middle School	Baker	4 years

2.3. Collection Procedure and Data Analysis

Participants were sought in the metropolitan region of Recife (Brazil), and once informed of the research objectives and that interviews would be recorded, being also guaranteed secrecy about the information, they signed the “Term Consent”. Participants were interviewed individually in their homes or other place of their choice. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed literally, trying to maintain maximum fidelity on what was said.

A qualitative approach was elected so that participants could better express their feelings in their words regarding the subject matter. Data were analyzed according to the Content Analysis, specifically thematic content analysis, according to Minayo (2004), which constitutes of the following steps: pre-analysis, organization of material, analysis and interpretation of data. The aim is to find core meanings put up often in the speech of and analyze them based on the literature.

3. Results and Discussion

From the collected data it was possible to form eight cores of meaning: feelings about the remarriage of their child; changes observed in the relationship with his/her son/daughter; perceived changes in the relationship with their grandchildren; relationship with the new partner of the child; relationships with stepchildren (if any); factors that facilitate coexistence; factors that hinder the coexistence; and strategies to deal with potential conflicts.

3.1. Feelings about the Remarriage of Their Children

Participants demonstrated mostly feel good about remarriage of the children, since they mostly become happier. Only in one case reported the initial reaction was not good, but with the passage of time, the grandmother proved to be happy for the child. We see this process of adaptation on the testimony of Natalia “*At first when I heard it I felt bad because I did not like the person ... but when I got to know, that has improved.*” As pointed out by Freitas, Silva and Bridges (2012) remarriage involves reorganization in the affective life, social network, and infrastructure. Faced with these challenges reorganization of the extended family can serve as a facilitator in adapting the new family members, but also obstruct to demonstrate loyalty to old sons or daughters in law. An example of assistance can be read in the following statement: “*It had been 12 years since she had separated when she began dating again and got married, it was very good, you know (...) Even I was depressed when she separated... when she remarried it was so good for her and for me too*” (Pamela). It is observed in these lines that the grandmother wanted her daughter to be happy again. In addition, one can notice how she became involved in her daughter’s separation, going through a time of mourning, as reported by Visher and Visher (1988), the loss resulting from the separation needs to be recognized and also drafted. Another testimony that demonstrates happiness regarding the daughter’s remarriage is from Roberta “*When I heard they were going to marry I was very happy! Because they were already frustrated thinking they were not going to marry, so it was*

really good.” However, there are also two cases where difficulties were reported within the daughter’s remarriage, and there may be the possibility of grandparents have served as an obstacle to the new relationship. Sandra says *“It was very hard for me because as soon as she broke up and she living with this other person and I could not agree, thus generating conflicts.”*

3.2. Changes in the Relationship with His/Her Son/Daughter

In some cases there was an improvement in the relationship between grandparents and children, confirming [Cardoso \(2011\)](#) who argues that grandparents can take the role of agents of socialization movement in the family, having intensified its presence in family relationships. This can be evidenced in the words of Pamela *“Much better (the relationship). Now she’s more open with me ... and is less stressed as well. As they both understand each other’s good for me too.”* An improvement in relations is also demonstrated in the speech of Roberta, who said, *“After they separated they recognize that they had made a mistake and it was very good to start well again. They knew I was against in the first relationship they had, but did not say much. And then when the divorce happened they recognized it. Our relationship was already good, but got better. They seem to have come to life again.”* In this testimony we can also observe the role of the grandmother in the divorce process, showing the involvement in the delicate moment that her daughter was going corroborating to what was evidenced by [Araújo and Dias \(2002\)](#). [Hall and Kruk \(1995\)](#) complement that grandparents are fundamental to provide support to children and grandchildren in this situation, as was the case with Roberta. There are also grandparents who report that there has been no change in their relationship with their children as Elaine said *“With my son continued the same relationship ... he in his house and here I am (in her house) ... in this sense it is the same thing.”* There were also cases where, by not agreeing with the remarriage, the relationship between grandparents and children presented conflicts, as Valerie said *“Soon he came to live with me and the new wife and two children and then we had many problems.”* The relationship between grandparents and children also influences the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren ([Gladstone, 1989](#)). Sandra portrays this well: *“As I did not agree, we had some conflicts and she even forbade us from seeing the children. I was very sad.”*

3.3. Changes in Relationships with Grandchildren

All participants grandparents reported having a good relationship with their grandchildren, which is intensified from the separation and remarriage of the children, corroborating [Block \(2002\)](#) who claims that the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren is close, as family members when requiring support commonly seek out of their generations for assistance. Furthermore, parents experience a situation where they are fragile after divorce. According to the author, it is a kind of two-way path, where grandchildren serve as support for the grandparents, and the grandparents to the grandchildren. Marluce reported *“When my grandchildren are come over I cook what they like, buy some sweets because they are crazy for it ... since his mother remarried we became closer. He calls me ... he’s more open and we talk more.”* A grandfather said, *“here and there we were with them which gives us a lot of joy.”* It was found that grandparents seek a closer relationship with the grandchildren, so that they can serve as support in the remarriage process. In this sense they strive to let the grandchildren at ease as explains Roberta *“The love increased, it seems that our relationship became more intense... they know they can count on me for everything. (...) I do a lot else for them, pick them up from school, and take care of them...”* Elaine said that there is a closer relationship with the grandchildren *“I have more contact with them ... I always see them and they come here.”* According to [Gladstone \(1989\)](#) this contact is mediated by children, in general it is observed that grandparents serve as support aiding the adaptation scored as [Lussier et al. \(2002\)](#). This is evident in the testimony of Pamela *“We (referring to the granddaughter) are more open with each other ... we talk more. When sometimes she feels jealous about her mother’s attention, I explain to her and she can understand better. We have an open relationship.”*

3.4. Relationship with the New Partner of Their Son/Daughter

Most participants reported having a good relationship with the new partner of their children. [Gladstone \(1989\)](#) states that a good relationship with the new spouse is considered beneficial, in addition to facilitating access to their grandchildren. One can see the importance of this relationship for the grandchildren in Elaine’s speech *“So ... I talk, it’s that little conversation, only the necessary. But it is important for my grandchildren ...”*. Ro-

berta highlights the importance of non-interference to a good relationship with her new son in law: *“I have no complaints. I respect and also try not to put too much ... not give guesses ... it’s their relationship!”* This corroborates with Araújo and Dias (1999) which concluded that the key to a good contact with children and grandchildren. Thus, only give advice when asked, taking a position of helping without interfering. There are cases where the relationship with the new spouse of the children is difficult because of the rejection of the remarriage or the fidelity to the former spouse, as we read in Gladstone (1989). The testimony of Sandra demonstrates this rejection very explicitly: *“As I and her father do not agree, he does not come here ... so far I can not say we have a relationship.”*

3.5. Relationships with Stepgrandchildren

Four of the eight grandparents won “stepgrandchildren” from the remarriage of children. The relationship between grandparents and they appear to be friendly, but distant, as seen in the testimony of Marluce *“I get along with them ... they are good guys and polite and even call me aunt.”* It can be inferred that in this case this grandmother has not positioned herself as grandmother to with these stepchildren, but rather as aunt. Gladstone says that this phenomenon can occur, and even make grandparents get closer to the grandchildren, who are consanguineous, and this may be a way to distinguish the stepgrandchildren from grandchildren. Block (2002) also found that generally the proximity between grandchildren and grandparents by blood is higher, and the relationship of grandparents with the stepgrandchildren is more on an instrumental support level. In only one case there was a good relationship between grandmother and stepgrandchildren, as Valerie said, *“I like them and they call me grandmother (...) since they came to live with me I was always with them. I cooked, sent them to school and made all that stuff.”* This statement shows what was found by Gladstone (1989) that geographical proximity allows greater interaction between the components of the family system, basing the affection.

3.6. Factors that Facilitate the Coexistence

Among the factors that facilitate the coexistence participants cited: family dinners, leaving the couple to have their lives, the spouse handle well the grandchildren, daughter maturing after separation, conversations, support their children with love, give support to grandchildren. It can be seen therefore how grandparents are involved in the remarriage process of the children, being actually part of the adaptation process. Because they are already in a more stable phase in their lives, grandparents can provide an emotional and instrumental assistance to children and grandchildren, having an active role in the process (Johnson, 1988). This is clear in Roberta’s testimony: *“We chat and get updated about what is going on... it ends up helping the coexistence and gets us to know each other better too.”*

3.7. Factors that Hinder the Coexistence

The most frequently cited factors that hinder the coexistence were: the couple have moved further abroad, the in law wanted to take the single role of parent, the influence of friends, how the remarriage occurred, and the fact the couple have moved in with the grandmother. There is also a participant who claims to have no difficulties, since remarriage left her daughter happy. It is observed again, as grandparents become involved in remarriage process of the children, as evidenced in several studies, such as in Block (2002) which highlights the importance of taking into account the grandparents. Still on the geographical distance, cited as a difficulty for coexistence, Gladstone (1989) explains that the greater the distance, the harder it is to mediate contact between grandparents and grandchildren.

3.8. Strategies to Deal with Potential Conflicts

In general it is observed that grandparents take a stance to adapt to the situation as Elaine says: *“We keep going because for our grandchildren do everything, right?”*. Non-interference appears again as a strategy to deal with conflicts, as Pamela said: *“I leave them to solve their relationship, I try trust that my daughter knows how to do things. If she needs me, I am here.”* According to Gladstone (1989) this stance of non-interference is the key to facilitate coexistence. Araújo and Dias (2002) add that the advice should only be given when asked. In the case of Matthew he observed their willingness to give advice, but he does not find space *“I advise but can not find open ears or attention to what I would say.”* And added: *“It’s great to see that there are studies done to help*

us ... in my case I need help to cope better with the situation,” what emphasizes the importance of assistance the remarried families, which is specific to each member involved.

4. Conclusion

From the data presented it was observed that the involvement with the remarriage of children by grandparents is big. Mostly grandparents realized remarriage as something beneficial for their kids, showing support to them and also to their grandchildren. However, this will depend on how the loss on the previous separation was elaborated, making it a key factor for the acceptance of remarriage.

The relationship between grandparents and grandchildren became closer after the remarriage of the children, since the grandchildren seek the generation of grandparents for support. Grandparents are available and do their best to assist in the adaptation, as evidenced in the testimonies, given their love to their children and grandchildren.

Non-interference in the new couple relationship proved to be a facilitator factor of coexistence of the new family structure. The complicating factors arise from geographical distance and difficulties with the new spouse, which can lead to conflicts in grandparent-child relationship, also influencing the grandparents-grandchildren relationship. A process of adaptation is also important for grandparents for achieving a sense of family, involving all members is required.

It was also noted that the need is expressed for some kind of support for that the adaptation can take place in a better way. Therefore, it is suggested conducting support groups for the remarried families, involving all members, not just the nuclear family. These issues still need to be further explored, taking into account, for example, the differences between inbred grandparents and stepgrandparents (Gabar & Theodore, 2000), as well as the perceptions of children and grandchildren themselves about the importance of grandparents in this process. It is hoped that this research has achieved its goals and that it can stimulate more research on the remarriage area involving the extended family, which is also affected by the changes.

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