

‘I want (to be) an active grandmother’ – activity as a new normative framework of subjective meanings and expectations associated with the grandmother role

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ABSTRACT

The article analyses the norms of grandmothing in relation to cultural representations of active ageing. Based on interviews that were carried out with 20 mothers and 20 grandmothers of children under the age of ten, the article focuses on the way in which the current emphasis on activity influences ideas about how the roles of grandparent should be performed and how women relate to their own ageing. The analysis shows that being active represented a significant framework of the mothers’ notions and expectations associated with care provided by grandmothers, of grandmothers’ talk about their own grandparental role and how both generations of women interpret their own memories of their own grandmothers. Both the mothers and the grandmothers noted how the family role of grandmothers had changed compared to past generations of grandmothers. This change was framed by the idea of having an active lifestyle and this idea formed an important framework for the mothers’ expectations about what their role as grandmothers might be like in the future. This paper critically analyses those representations of the grandmother role and point out the emergence of new forms of conflicts and challenges, and the sense of ambivalence about traditional roles that result from the close association made between being active and the representation of grandmothing.

KEY WORDS— activity, active ageing, care, grandmother role, intergenerational solidarity.

Introduction

Perceptions of the role of older people in society and societal ideas about ‘appropriate’ forms of life in old age have undergone significant transformations in the past few decades. At the same time, this cultural representation of ageing also considerably influences the way in which the roles of

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grandparents are constructed and where these figure within the framework of the individual life biography. The increasing emphasis on activity and productivity in old age can be considered one of these key changes in the perception of ageing (e.g. Katz 2000). The discourses of successful or active ageing depict 'ideal' ageing as encompassing a prolonged working career and an active lifestyle. These positive visions of ageing, which can be perceived as the logical response to the process of 'demographic ageing', are based on the idea of life in old age (mainly after retirement) as a time when new opportunities for self-fulfilment open up. Peter Laslett (1989) introduced the concept of the 'third age' as a specific stage in life when people have plenty of free time, are still in relatively good health and, at the same time, are free from the work market. Laslett conceptualised the third age as a positive outcome of human biography marked by activities that were not possible in previous stages in life owing to the lack of time resulting from family or work commitments. However, in Laslett's normative concept, the freedom of the third age is constrained by the apparent obligation imposed on seniors to remain active in this time of life. He himself adds that older people must be divesting of current inactivity (Laslett 1989: 202). The vision of the third age emphasises the significance of activities that have a different content and meaning from the activities that are part of the productive age (such as taking care of others). Numerous empirical studies have confirmed that many older persons (in most cases women) are forced to negotiate the role they want/are able to play in between different expectations to be active (to work, devote time to hobbies and leisure activities) and to help with the care for grandchildren, and that this situation produces new forms of conflict (see e.g. May, Mason and Clarke 2012).

This paper analyses the norms of grandmothering in relation to the cultural representation of active/successful ageing. Expectations and perceptions associated with what it means to be a grandparent are historically and culturally variable and strongly reflect wider societal notions of the roles of older people in society (Uhlenberg 2005). In this regard, it is impossible to analyse normative notions of the grandmother role in isolation from analysis of the cultural representations of ageing. This paper specifically targets the way in which the current emphasis on activity influences ideas about how the role of grandmother should be fulfilled. It focuses on two generations of women in the Czech Republic who are currently mothers or grandmothers of young children. Based on in-depth interviews that were carried out with 20 mothers and 20 grandmothers of children under the age of ten, the article analyses how the discourse of activity influences how they construct the norms of grandmothering.

Cultural scripts of grandparenting and the cultural representations of ageing

In comparison with the role of mother, father or parent, the role of grandparent is much less associated with clear normative expectations. Silverstein, Giarrusso and Bengtson (1998) even consider normative ambiguity to be one of the key characteristics of this role. This leaves the extent and character of grandparents' involvement in care the subject of constant negotiation. The lack of clear guidelines about how this role should be performed is reflected in the heterogeneity of the ways in which individuals fulfil this role. Empirical studies can be found that defy the various typologies of the grandparental role with respect to how involved grandparents are in care, the nature of their relationship to their grandchildren, the different positions they may occupy within the family and the type of care they provide (*e.g.* Gauthier 2002; Mueller, Wilhelm and Elder 2002). Despite the aforementioned ambiguity of the grandparental role and the great variability in its fulfilment, certain normative 'grand' expectations can be identified (Kemp 2004). These include, for example, the requirement that grandparents do not significantly interfere with the rules about how grandchildren are raised, which should be determined by the parents (Brehehy, Stephenson and Spilsbury 2013; Kemp 2004; May, Mason and Clarke 2012). These normative expectations, however, do not represent any stable or historical contexts. On the contrary, these are expectations that reflect wider societal values – such as the increased emphasis on individualism, reflected in the requirement for grandparents to be independent of younger generations (Kemp 2004).

Notions of the grandparent role are changing, as are notions of older people's place in society. Uhlenberg (2005: 92) calls these notions 'cultural scripts of what it means to be a grandparent'. For example, at the beginning of the 20th century, grandparents were often described as people who could potentially interfere in the relationship between grandchildren and their parents, and there were even cases where their influence was linked to the grandchildren developing mental disorders. In this case the close connection between old age and powerlessness, backwardness and illness was also reflected in the perception of capability and the position of grandparents (Uhlenberg and Kirby 1998: 39). The current middle-class cultural script of grandparenthood is based on the idea of the grandparent as an autonomous participant, a sensitive companion and a friend for the grandchildren. It resonates with the current representation of successful ageing showing older age as a period in which people are retired but still in good health, active and economically secure (Uhlenberg 2005). Within

this framework, the grandparent role is represented as another part of the project of seeking personal fulfilment during the third age.

Societal representations of ageing make up the fundamental frame in which values relating to the grandparent role are constructed. The third age vision and the current politics of active, successful and healthy ageing fundamentally redefine the values associated with ageing and life after retirement. Activity is becoming a crucial framework for these representations. Activity is currently perceived as a rather unquestioned requirement on the path to 'good' and 'healthy' ageing. As Katz (2000) notes, activity has become an ethical keyword, framing the current understanding of ageing. It is becoming an inseparable part of professional vocabulary and the subject of many (not only) gerontological studies focused on mapping the relationship between activity and satisfaction and wellbeing and health in old age. Activity is presented as a positive force that can help 'fight' ageing and minimise the risks of dependence or illness (Rudman 2006). The vision of active ageing is based on the presumption that 'the active lifestyle is positively connected with other ethically appreciated values such as self-autonomy, better health, life satisfaction and life quality in general' (Avramov and Mašková 2003: 24). This normative vision thus implicitly presumes that being active also means being happier or at least ageing 'better'.

On the level of social policy, activity has become a distinctive tool for re-defining the meanings associated with old age and ageing, and offering a new framework in which to contemplate what demographic ageing and its impact may mean. In accounts of ageing as an opportunity (not a threat), active ageing is presented as a positive response to the challenges associated with demographic ageing and the key to addressing them successfully. The solution to the threats of demographic ageing offered by active ageing is mainly a production of specific types of subjects 'colonised' by activity with the emphasis on productivity (Moulaert and Biggs 2012). However, not all activity is defined as meaningful in the discourses of active ageing (*cf.* Biggs 2001). Critiques of these representations of ageing highlight the very narrow conceptualisation of what it means to age actively, as it relates mainly to labour market participation, life-long learning and leisure activities (Hepworth 1995; Clarke and Warren 2007; Katz 2000). As Biggs (2001) points out, active ageing policies challenge the ageist images of ageing and offer a form of social inclusion based on work and activity. At the same time, however, some activities, such as care-giving, are not included in these agendas.

There has always been great importance attached to the involvement of grandparents in the care of young children in Czech(oslovak) society. Večerník and Matějů (1999: 102) even describe the system of intergenerational

dependence as one of the crucial characteristics distinguishing the Czechoslovakian family from the then nuclear families west of our borders. Care provided by grandmothers was historically one of the necessary conditions for women to return to the labour market after maternity leave (Hašková, Maříková and Uhde 2009). Although we can currently find evidence that the norm of the intensively involved grandparent is changing in Czech society (Petrová Kafková 2010),¹ care provided by a grandparent still represents one of the most preferred forms of child care in the eyes of Czech parents (Höhne *et al.* 2010). In the Czech Republic, around 30 per cent of grandparents take care of grandchildren under the age of ten on a daily or weekly regular basis, whereas approximately one-fifth of Czech grandparents are not involved in the care of grandchildren at all (Hasmanová Marhánková and Štípková 2014: 17). Gender represents one of the most distinctive involvement determinants. Approximately 37 per cent of grandmothers, compared to 23 per cent of grandfathers, are involved in the intense care of small grandchildren (Hasmanová Marhánková and Štípková 2014: 20). On average, grandfathers thus spend four hours a week less time taking care of grandchildren than grandmothers (Höhne *et al.* 2010: 37).

Methodology

This study is based on qualitative research focused on the practices and meanings of grandparenthood in current Czech society. This paper is part of a broader research project, the aim of which was to examine the patterns of grandparents' involvement in the contemporary Czech family and to map the subjective meanings and conceptualisation of the grandparent role as constructed by various actors in the family. One of the aims of the project was to examine whether the norm of automatically available grandparent care and the crucial role of grandparents in creating work–life balance that was observed as a typical feature of Czech families under socialism (*e.g.* Možný 1999) still exists, or whether and in what ways it has been challenged by the changing representations of ageing and retirement, and the growing heterogeneity of individual lifestyles. During the research, 20 in-depth interviews with grandmothers and 20 in-depth interviews with mothers of grandchildren/children up to the age of ten years were carried out. The interviewed women were selected to represent various partnership and life arrangements. Full details of participants both grandmothers and mothers are provided in Tables 1 and 2.

Stratified purposeful sampling was used in the first phase of recruiting participants. The aim of this sampling strategy is 'to capture major variations

TABLE 1. Demographic details of participants: grandmothers

Pseudonym	Age	Educational level	Economic activity	Number of grandchildren	Frequency of contact ¹
Alice	62	University	Employed	4	Frequent
Darina	62	High school	Retired	2	Frequent
Hedviga	45	Basic	Employed	1	Frequent
Ida	52	University	Employed	1	Intensive
Jolana	65	High school	Retired	5	Frequent
Josefina	69	High school	Retired	9	Intensive
Karla	55	High school	Employed	1	Intensive
Kveta	57	High school	Retired	2	Intensive
Libuse	70	High school	Retired	3	Frequent
Lyvie	58	High school	Employed	2	Intensive
Magda	68	High school	Retired	4	Frequent
Marie	75	High school	Retired	7	Less frequent
Marina	63	High school	Employed	1	Less frequent
Miriam	50	High school	Employed	1	Frequent
Romana	64	High school	Employed	3	Frequent
Saskie	59	University	Employed	2	Frequent
Simona	70	High school	Retired	3	Intensive
Stela	61	High school	Retired	1	Frequent
Vera	71	High school	Retired	6	Frequent
Vladena	55	High school	Employed	3	Intensive

Note. 1. This refers to the amount of contact the grandmothers had with the grandchild/grandchildren with whom they spent the most time: intensive (daily contact or contact at least three times a week), frequent (contact at least once a week) or less frequent (contact several times per month).

rather than to identify a common core, although the latter may also emerge in the analysis' (Patton 1990: 174). We used this strategy to capture the heterogeneity of patterns in the performance of the grandmother role with respect to particular factors that may influence the way women perform and conceptualise the role of grandmother. Four main participant characteristics were taken into account in the sampling process: the kinds of family arrangements in which the participant's children/grandchildren were growing up, the participant's educational level, the place of residence and work (in)activity.² The sample was constructed to comprise women with (grand)children in various family arrangements (*i.e.* being raised by single mothers, married couples, divorced parents, co-habiting couples), mothers/grandmothers who still work as well as those who are on parental leave/retired, women with different levels of education, and women living in cities and in rural areas. These criteria were selected with respect to the project's overall interest in the role grandmothers play in the harmonisation of work and care in families, as they have been repeatedly referred to in previous studies as factors that may influence these processes (*e.g.* Ahrons 2007; Uhlenberg and Hammill 1998). Only women with at least one child/

TABLE 2. Demographic details of participants: mothers

Pseudonym	Age	Educational level	Economic activity	Number of children	Age of children
Adela	31	High school	Full-time employed	1	6 years
Agnes	33	High school	Full-time employed	1	4 years
Dagmar	25	High school	Part time employed	1	2 years
Dominika	38	University	Full-time employed	2	5 and 8 years
Irma	41	High school	Full-time employed	2	10 and 13 years
Ivona	32	High school	Full-time employed	1	4 years
Judita	24	University	Parental leave	1	2 months
Kamila	39	High school	Full-time employed	2	6 and 9 years
Laura	36	High school	Full-time employed	1	9 years
Libuska	37	University	Parental leave	1	9 months
Linda	30	University	Parental leave	1	8 months
Milada	31	High school	Part-time employed	2	3 and 3 years
Mirka	39	University	Part-time employed	3	3, 9 and 15 years
Nora	40	High school	Full-time employed	2	5 and 8 years
Pavčina	27	Basic	Parental leave	2	12 months and 6 years
Petra	30	University	Parental leave	1	6 months
Sona	32	University	Parental leave	1	6 months
Sylva	32	University	Full-time employed	1	7 years
Vanda	31	High school	Parental leave	1	3 years
Vanesa	32	University	Part-time employed	2	5 and 7 years

grandchild under the age of ten were interviewed. Grandchildren of this age require adult care, so families in this stage of life face increased demands stemming from the need to harmonise work and family lives. The assumption was that parents in this stage of life more often ‘ask for’ help caring for their children, which is reflected in a need to define more clearly the rules for grandmother involvement and any expected forms of help.

The interviews were analysed on an ongoing basis. Reference to the importance of having an active lifestyle and staying active was a significantly distinct way of referring to the performance of the grandparent role by those grandmothers who were recruited through centres offering leisure-time activities for seniors and Universities of the Third Age, had higher education and lived in large cities. In the second phase of the sampling process we decided to focus more on this group of women to explore further how grandmotherhood is performed in the context of various lifestyles and changing representations of ageing. Snowball sampling was used to contact another five grandmothers. Data from my previous ethnographic research in centres for seniors in the Czech Republic (*see* Hasmanová Marhánková 2014) were used as a form of triangulation.

In both participant groups, the interviews focused on family history (mostly on the memories of the respondents’ own (grand)parents and their role in

the family), how the care of small children is organised in the family, the relationships between individual generations and ideas about the fulfilment of the (grand)parental role. The interviews lasted an average of 40 minutes and were recorded with participant approval and transcribed verbatim. The analysis followed the rules of thematic analysis (Ezzy 2002). Thematic analysis represents a specific way of seeing data through codes and categories, which are used as a way in which to make sense out of seemingly unrelated material (Boyatzis 1998). Although the categories and themes that are explored are not predetermined in thematic analysis, the general research question and the theoretical position of the researcher significantly guide the process of coding. When using thematic analysis as a way of looking at data, we must remember that some aspects of the data may be more or less visible to one researcher or another. Our previous interest in gender relations and the organisation of care in the family and in discourses of active ageing and their impact on the ways seniors relate to their ageing therefore steered our analysis in a specific direction. The analysis presented in this paper focused on mapping in what ways references to activity and being active are becoming part of the way in which mothers formulate the notions and expectations they associate with the grandparent's role, how grandmothers talk about their role as a grandparent and how both generations of women interpret memories of their own grandmothers.

A comparison with previous generations of grandmothers: how (in)active grandmothers were in the past

In participants' narratives, previous generations of grandmothers were represented as calm, caring women whom the women remembered with love. However, the grandmothers interviewed also emphasised that the relationship their grandmothers had with them was different from the relationship they currently have with their grandchildren. In the grandmothers' memories, their grandparents were relatively distant figures with whom they spent holidays, but did not have any closer, more personal relationship. The mothers interviewed, by contrast, spoke of their own grandmothers as having been an important part of the family and as people with whom they had spent a lot of time when they were children. In these mothers' narratives two largely distinctive profiles of grandmothers emerged. The first was a grandmother figure who basically supplemented the parental role (picking children up from school, babysitting when the kids were sick, *etc.*). The role of and time spent with this type of grandmother differed little from the everyday care provided by the parents. The second and more common depiction of the mothers' grandmothers was one in which

the previous generation of grandmothers were figures whom the children associated with holidays and weekends. Asked how they spent their free time with their grandmothers, the mothers did not enumerate a list of activities or hobbies they did together, but rather described the homely atmosphere their grandmothers created:

I don't know if modern grandmothers now are different, but then it was all about them baking something in the kitchen and putting the cake on the table, and we'd all gather round it, you know, and have a cup of tea. That's what it was about. And grandma would be weeding in the garden, and the other one too, actually, and that was it. Apart from that I'd say we didn't do much with them. (Soña, mother)

Well, grandma always put a lot of food on the table, so we'd nibble on it all day and sit down and listened to the adults talking. And we'd run with the other children, play with the animals, but grandma herself didn't spend time with us. (Vanda, mother)

The quotes above also reveal that in the mothers' descriptions their grandmothers were mostly associated with activities traditionally connected with the role of women, such as baking and housework. They remembered the time they spent with their grandparents as a time of adventure and escape from their everyday routine. However, the adventures and activities of that time were not directly associated with the grandparents themselves, but rather with the place they lived (usually a village), which itself offered new stimuli, and with the presence of other relatives (mostly cousins) and a specific atmosphere. In these narratives, the grandmothers were constructed as the ones who created a sense of family, who, through their care, kept the household functioning smoothly. The mothers noted that, compared to the current generation of grandmothers, the previous generation devoted their full attention to caring responsibilities and housework, with no significant 'competition' from jobs or hobbies. The current generation of grandmothers was described both by the grandmothers themselves and by the mothers as different from previous generations. Josefina (grandmother) noted, for instance, that these days 'grandma has to do more'. She described herself as an 'emancipated grandmother' who had worked all her life and wanted to go back to work. Her own grandmother, in her words, 'didn't have an easy life, but it was quieter'. Similarly, the mothers interviewed also highlighted the fact that the current grandmothers' generation are 'working grandmothers', whereas the previous grandmothers' generation, in their memories, were fully concentrated on caring for the household. However, today's mothers did not view this full focus on care as positive compared to the current generation of grandmothers. On the contrary, they often talked about the previous grandmothers' generation as 'passive', while describing their own mothers and mothers-in-law as 'active', 'full of action' or 'modern'. In their descriptions, passivity referred

to a different form of care provided by the previous grandmothers' generation. The essence of that care was mostly about being present and providing all the necessary services involved in the routine, everyday care of a child and household. The current grandmothers' generation, by contrast, are, as the mothers described them, more focused on building a relationship with the grandchild and providing fun, not just basic, care:

For example, I think my mum is so much sportier, more active. I think my grandparents were really more, like ... they created a family environment, it was about food and going on walks outdoors and things like that, but, my mum also goes, for example with my son to kick the ball about, and that is something I don't remember ever doing with my grandma or granddad, but that's also because it's all different today. (Laura, mother)

Similarly, the grandmothers also described themselves as different, as more active and confident than previous generations of women:

For me, my grandma was passive. I'm not. (Alice, grandmother)

I am different, probably more emancipated and confident than my mum was. (Jolana, grandmother)

The dichotomy between being active or passive, or the modern and the traditional, represented one of the most significant frames that the women used when comparing the current grandmothers' generation with their own grandmothers' generation. It is apparent that the opposite sides in this dichotomy also bear different connotations. Although the participants always remember their own grandparents with love and never belittled the importance of the care provided by them, the difference observed in the current generation of grandmothers, a difference associated with their active lifestyle and the diversion from concentrating (only) on looking after the household, was presented by both the mothers and the grandmothers as positive. Therefore, in these descriptions, the references to being active also became a tool for reclassifying definitions traditionally associated with the grandmother's role and a manifestation of a generational transition for which the women were grateful.

What should grandmothers be like? The mothers' perspective

Within these narratives about the ideal role of a grandmother and what kind of grandmothers the current generation of mothers would like to be in the future, the mothers interviewed established and presented 'cultural scenarios about what it means to be a grandparent' (Uhlenberg 2005), and, through that, also revealed the wider societal notions of the role of older people in society. In these moments, activity served as one of the distinctive

normative frameworks of the picture of the ideal grandmother and the nature of care that ideal figure provides. While they described their own parental role with the association of the everyday routine duty of the care of children, the grandmother's role was placed in contrast to this character of care. In their descriptions, the ideal grandmother is not supposed to supplement or copy the care provided by the parents, but should instead provide a different dimension of care. In these descriptions, the ideal grandmother offers 'not only' help with care, but also fun and experiences:

For example, I would certainly be happy if my daughter would spend her free time with her grandparents in an active and meaningful way. So that they don't sit in front of the TV, or the computer, but they do something together outside, for example, or go on a trip somewhere, or read together, or play, so that it benefits her, like she spends time with her grandparents and that also helps her develop. (Linda, mother)

In these descriptions, ideal grandmothers often acted in accordance with the idea of the third age as a time inhabited by self-sufficient, relatively healthy, and above all active seniors who involve their grandchildren in their lifestyle, have hobbies and spend their free time actively. In these descriptions, the ideal grandparent was not only a present, loving figure, but also a mediator of meaningfully spent time. As is apparent from the above-mentioned quotations from mothers, not all the time spent with grandparents can be perceived as meaningfully spent. In these cases, activity often served as the line that distinguished 'just babysitting' from 'meaningfully spent free time', which the mothers associated with the ideal of what a grandparent's role should be. Mothers viewed grandparents' engagement in activities with their grandchildren in a positive light as something that differentiates the care provided by grandparents from the care provided by parents. The ideal grandmother would be not only a care-giver, but also a source of experiences, which strengthen the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren, and thereby make it precious:

I think that it's really about the experiences, which I was maybe missing somewhere, and actually don't have an example to follow. But I see that when my son comes back from his grandmother's and he's happy that they made something, that they went to the zoo and saw this and that. So I think that he'll remember that, and valuable relationship building is based on this... (Sylva, mother)

Mothers often talked about the fact that the ideal grandmother 'helps in the grandchild's development' (Judita, mother), or 'gives them something that the parents can't' (Dagmar, mother). Vanda, for example, summarised her idea of the ideal grandmother or grandfather with these words:

Well, they [ideal grandparents] should have a lot of hobbies, for sure, and they should be much more sport oriented so they can also give something to the children ... my mother-in-law is basically very close to the idea of what an ideal grandmother

should be. Yes, she has some hobbies, and she also takes the little one on trips. (Vanda, mother)

In these descriptions, the ideal grandmother is no longer just a care-giver and creator of the sense of family, but is somebody who should introduce the child to new interests and activities and should focus mainly on his or her development, which takes precedence over providing routine home care. As stated by Arber and Timonen (2012: 252), the idea that the older people should be active and productive represents a crucial transformation in the normative expectations imposed on the current-day seniors in Western societies. These representations of ageing have emancipating ambitions. Within these discourses, activity and productivity become distinctive mechanisms for relabelling the negative images of ageing (Biggs 2001). However, at the same time, these representations of active ageing, despite their emancipatory promises, produce new forms of normative expectations which can even increase pressure on older women. Today, it is not enough to just be present and help, as it was in case of the previous generation, but the ideal grandmother must also bring the child something new, create experiences and further the child's development. The emphasis on productivity is thus also becoming the new framework for the conceptualisation of the actual care that grandmothers should provide. Within the framework of the cultural scenario of the ideal grandparent that the mothers constructed during the interviews, grandmothers acted in accordance with the current representations of the older people as productive best agers who, through their activity, benefit others and society as a whole (Lessenich 2015).

The current importance of activity in how the grandparental role is constructed, however, is most visibly demonstrated by the ways in which the mothers themselves related to their future roles as grandmothers. The question of what kind of grandmother they would like to be in the future was identically answered with reference to the fact that they would like to be the grandmother who does not intervene too much in upbringing, is willing to always help their children and is an active grandmother.

I'd like to be the active kind of grandmother who's able to pay attention to him [the child], do some silly things with him and take him somewhere. (Petra, mother)

I would like to be an active grandmother who, for example, takes the kids places, the way, for example, my parents do – when they go somewhere, they simply take them with them, and also they don't just sit at home. So that is what I would like to do too, go places and show them things. (Kamila, mother)

The phrase 'active grandmother' in these accounts represents the idealised vision of old age, which, however, does not actually have any characteristics stereotypically associated with ageing. In these narratives, 'activity' or 'being active' mostly referred to physical activity, sports, and the possibility of

passing on and sharing experiences (showing the children something new or taking them on trips). In their idealised visions of their future role as a grandmother, mothers imagined themselves as the embodiment of the ‘third age’ lifestyle. They constructed a vision of their own grandmotherhood through references to an active lifestyle and free time, without such barriers as a job, care or their own limited self-sufficiency. Being an active grandmother thus also implicitly presupposes being in rather good health and having enough economic resources and free time to invest in the grandchildren. The mothers embraced this vision of their future as the easily accessible standard, expected and widely shared ideal. Only Irma considered that it is an ideal that might be hard to fulfil:

- Irma: I would like to be an active grandmother, but it’s not likely to happen. Because I had my children late, so, things like going skiing with them, I don’t know. I’ll do my best.
- Researcher: And what is an active grandmother?
- Irma: Well, one who goes skating, skiing or swimming with them, takes them to the café.

The frequency with which the word ‘active’ occurred in these descriptions of the ideal grandmother underscores the central place being active occupies in current depictions of life in older age. In these accounts, being active becomes a mechanism that distinguishes ‘good’ ageing from less desirable ideas (*e.g.* Hurd 1999; Lund and Engelsrud 2008; Townsend, Godfrey and Denby 2006). In the case of images of the grandmother role, it is becoming a symbol of the ideal of care provided by current grandmothers, and also a crucial defining feature of the person today’s mothers would like to be as a grandmother. The mothers’ narratives thus show that activity has become a presumed ideal of the fulfilment of the role of grandparent and the new normative framework through which women relate to their own ideas about life in old age.

What kind of grandmother am I? The role of activity in the grandmothers’ accounts

In all cases, the grandmothers related to their own grandparental role as a crucial part of their life, even though the amount of involvement in the care of grandchildren and the intensity of contact with them differed considerably. Grandmothers often contrasted their current grandparental role with their previous parental role. In these descriptions, old age was portrayed as a time of freedom, when there is no longer a need to harmonise work and family life, and, in contrast with the parental role, the

responsibility for rearing and routinely meeting a child's needs is over. In the absence of these barriers, the space that remains is exclusively for building a relationship with the child. In this regard, the women stressed that a grandmother should (and can) above all enjoy spending time with her grandchildren.

It is, of course, completely different, because you enjoy it more, the time you spent with him. You enjoy it to the last minute and then they leave. You, on the other hand, are glad, and you're thinking that although you're not young anymore, you have your peace – but you also look forward to him coming again, when you'll see him again, when he'll turn everything upside down again. It is beautiful, yeah. (Ida, grandmother)

In the women's narratives, being a grandparent was described as a role that occupies a primary place in the period of one's old age. The persisting availability norm that associates the ideal grandmother with always being an available and willing source of help and care is apparent from the participants' narratives. At the same time, however, there was a very distinctive, albeit small, group of women among the participants who had a higher level of education and lived in larger towns who explicitly defined themselves as opposed to the availability norm and who presented a much more ambivalent image of negotiations on the involvement of grandmothers in care and definitions of the grandparental role. These women represented a rather specific group, in regard to both their lifestyle and their socio-economic characteristics. Their daily regime was significantly organised around leisure activities, they often attended specialised (in most cases language) courses for seniors and enrolled in the University of the Third Age. Their active lifestyles were an important part of how they related to their life after retirement (*cf.* Hasmanová Marhánková 2014), and also a distinctive axis of their conceptualisation of the grandparental role. In their narratives they pointed out the need to mark out a clear place for grandparenting in their life, taking into account their other needs and efforts, in order to preserve their independence and their own way of life:

I don't know if I'm the average grandmother, because I want to preserve the kind of ... like some grandmothers are babysitting from morning to evening, you know ... and I, on the other hand, want to keep some things for myself ... I think that in the past, grandmothers were different. These days the opportunities, I don't know, to attend, for example, English courses, I want to go on holiday, go somewhere, relax ... So, I don't know. But I do love them and like seeing them. (Libuse, grandmother)

Libuse's reference to the fact that she is probably not 'the average grandmother' – *i.e.* a grandmother who would always babysit under any circumstances – as well as the need to justify why she is not and does not want to

be that kind of grandmother, show that the idea that a grandmother should always be available still strongly determines the cultural script about what the grandmother's role should be, to which even women who do not fulfil it must relate. Libuse spoke proudly about her active lifestyle and was determined to keep it, even if she sadly confessed that it had become a source of conflict with her daughter, who would welcome more involvement from her in caring for her grandchildren.

The need to also 'have time for yourself' (Magda, grandmother) also resonated in the accounts of women living a similar lifestyle to Libuse. These women often pointed out the harmful effects of excessive involvement in the care of grandchildren when it becomes the only way to fill free time in old age. Although they talked about their grandchildren with love and devoted a significant amount of their free time to them, they also pointed out that becoming 'just' a grandmother is not good for them or their grandchildren:

I don't want to supplement the parents, because the kids will grow up and, if we live that long, they'll be less interested in their grandmothers, they'll go everywhere on their own, won't they, and what then? I want to keep my free time, I'm not going to just sit there and stare out the window. So, exercising, English, choir, then that club, University of the Third Age, I'll have two courses now, because I'm already doing one online. (Vera, grandmother)

As in the interview with Vera, an active lifestyle that is not only focused on child care is their guarantee that in later years, when the grandchildren no longer need as much care, they will not end up with an empty life and, at the same time, they will be sufficiently 'interesting' for their grandchildren:

You should also have your own interests. Then you're also interesting for your grandchildren. When you just dedicate yourself to them, then you basically have nothing else to offer them. I'd like to be the grandmother that's interesting for them because of something else as well. (Magda, grandmother)

In this regard, Magda cited the negative example of one friend who dedicates all her free time to caring for her grandchildren. This intense involvement in care did not appear in this conceptualisation of the grandparental role as a precondition for its convenient fulfilment. In contrast to the norm of constant availability, these women established a new normative framework for the role of grandmother where activity becomes a significant part of ideas about 'good' grandparenthood. These women talked about themselves with pride as 'active grandmothers' and they emphasised their active lifestyles as an important part of their idea of life in old age. Like the mothers, they pointed out that it was their active lifestyles that make them potentially valuable for their grandchildren:

At 60 years of age I have now started to play the electric drums, and they [the grandchildren] value this, and this gives me a bit of an edge over the other grandmother, that I have these sports or cultural interests, that I'm even able to play football with them, if I have good shoes. So, a grandmother, well, she should do her best to be healthy, because when there are problems, then it's not good. (Vera, grandmother)

Vera also points out that you have to have your own interests as well, and that that is the very thing that makes her interesting for her grandchildren. If grandmothers only focus on care, they have nothing else to offer the grandchildren. What is more, she talked about herself as a grandmother who wants to be interesting because of something else (other than being a grandmother) as well. In the women's narratives, activity was an important part of the image of the 'ideal grandparent' they constructed. Similarly, like in the mothers' testimonies, it symbolically distinguished 'active grandmothers', who are interesting for the grandchildren, from the 'less'-interesting grandmothers. In this context, Vera spoke about the fact that, thanks to her interests and active lifestyle, she has 'a bit of an edge over the other grandmother'. In these descriptions, activity and personal interests are a kind of capital that the grandmother can offer her grandchildren. At the same time, it acts as a tool to build up their own self-image in old age and define themselves in relation to their peers. In this context, the activity norm must also be perceived with regard to its stratification dimension. Among the grandmothers, the emphasis on an active lifestyle was typical for women with a higher level of education living in towns, and who had the opportunity, as well as the economic and cultural capital, to fulfil this image of an active grandmother. Although the activity norm was presented by these women as the ideal to which they compared other grandparents, the lifestyle to which it referred was typical for only a certain group of women.

Emancipation through activity? Reflections on the discourse of active ageing in representations of 'good' grandmothering

In light of the long tradition of associating old age with being passive, more and more frequent images of old age emphasising activity and independence may look like an unequivocally positive change in the view of this stage in a person's life, and as a path to increasing the social status of older people (Walker and Dlott 2000). However, and unfortunately, the emancipatory potential of active ageing representations is much more ambivalent than it would seem from the aforementioned statement. This fact is very well illustrated by the cultural script of what it means to be a 'good' grandmother that was presented by the women in the interviews.

This scenario emphasising that grandmothers should not be ‘merely’ grandmothers and care-givers, but should be engaged in an active lifestyle from which the grandchildren can also benefit, reflects in many ways the transition of societal definitions associated with ageing, where activity is becoming the crucial framework. It presents old age as the life period that should be filled with personal interests. At the same time, to a significant extent, it re-labels traditional definitions associated with the gender role of women as care-givers. It presents grandmothers as experienced mediators who help grandchildren develop through their own interests and whose free time is not devoted solely to others’ needs. As noted by Beck-Gernsheim:

changes in the notions of what a normal woman’s biography looks like produce not only new women and new mothers, but also new grandmothers. Many women in their fifties (and an even larger number of women who will reach this age in the following decades) are bearers of the hope ‘virus’, or at least an idea about living according to their own vision. They have their own goals outside of the family field – whether it is their own career, volunteering or (finally!) their own interests. (Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 74–5)

According to Beck-Gernsheim, these grandmothers will approach their grandparental role with different expectations, greater flexibility and a decreased willingness to subordinate their time to caring. The presence of activity as a new normative framework for the grandparental role also brings with it greater variability in ideas on what the role of grandmother brings, which are framed with traditional gender expectations.

At the same time, this emphasis on the older people having their own interests, and therefore fulfilling the idea of active ageing and active grandparents, easily comes into conflict with other norms associated with the grandparental role. Grandmothers are subject to contradictory demands: to preserve their own active lifestyles and interests and, at the same time, to be always available and ready to rush to help their family. The contradictory nature of these grandparental norms is illustrated by the testimony of Judita (mother). She, on the one hand, emphasises that the ideal grandmother ‘should still have her own life’ and ‘it shouldn’t be like, so now I have grandchildren and I’ll never do anything else’, but on the other hand, in a different part of the interview, she blames her mother for not being fully involved in her role as grandmother and not subordinating her lifestyle to it:

Well, for sure, for example, when looking at it from a different point of view, like what I would change about my own mum in relation to grandparenthood, then I would definitely retire. That’s what she promised at the beginning but didn’t do. She’s actually still working and we see each other only at weekends. And that is, for example, what I would do differently. If I were a grandmother, I would want to do it full time. And I would definitely want to be close to the children. (Judita, mother)

The complex way in which women have to negotiate between these contradictory requirements is also documented in the story of the aforementioned Libuse, who intensively cares for her disabled husband, tries hard to preserve her interests and tries to be a good grandmother. With her lifestyle, she fulfils the idea of an active ageing grandmother who ‘has something to offer’. However, at the same time, she faces reproach from the middle generation for not being the ideal grandmother who is available every day:

Libuse: ...so I told my daughter clearly not to count on it [that she will be intensively involved in the care of the grandchildren], because then I’d be blamed because there are grandmothers who even work and babysit every day, all day. I’m not that kind of grandmother.

Interviewer: And your daughter really blamed you for that?

Libuse: There were many times I really looked after my grandson a lot, and when, after that, my daughter told me that I don’t want to babysit enough, I cried about that in secret. I really felt sad.

In a situation where there is a persisting societal norm that grandmothers will always and happily rush to help with the grandchildren (which in the Czech Republic is further strengthened by the limited availability of pre-school care services), the requirement that grandmothers be active and enrich their grandchildren with their own experiences becomes just another normative expectation that strengthens the sense of ambivalence grandmothers feel about care norms and intergenerational solidarity.

At the same time, the imperative of an active lifestyle in old age undermines the position of those who cannot have such a lifestyle, *e.g.* because of worsening health. All the women interviewed were in relatively good health and were conscious of this fact as a precondition for their involvement in caring for their grandchildren. Concerns about whether they would still be able to comply with this role in the future most often resonated in the interviews with older women who emphasised their active lifestyle and their ‘active’ grandmother role. For many of them, the prospect of worsening health was a dreaded threat that would put their ability to be actively involved in care at risk. In this regard, health became an important precondition for their ability to be active and, therefore, also fulfil the ideal of being a grandmother who is not only available, but also shares her experiences.

Well, the important thing is for the grandparents to be healthy, because otherwise they’re useless. Or they could have the child come to see them, and then they’d be at home with them and chat, but they wouldn’t be able to do any activities with them ... For example, I used to take the boys cycling before I moved to city centre. They’ll remember it later, hopefully, as a memory of grandma, or granddad, that she played football with them, instead of just sitting around with them. (Vera, grandmother)

Sighing with this comment, Vera presents a distinction between ideal grandparents and grandparents who do not have this kind of value. Activity, or rather the ability to be active (which is dictated by health, among other things), is the axis of this distinction. It is certainly possible to be a grandmother who is not active and can 'only' talk with her grandchildren; however, in Vera's opinion, fulfilling the grandparental role in this way holds little appeal. The emancipatory promise heralded by a vision of old age that is associated with being active is consequently very limited. To paraphrase Vera's statement, under the dictum of 'being active' in old age, those grandparents who lose their ability to offer their grandchildren entertainment and new experiences may easily come to be seen as 'useless'.

Conclusion

Like previous research on grandparenting, our study highlights the wide array of meanings associated with the role of grandmother. Although we can identify certain normative expectations associated with the role of grandmother (such as that a 'good' grandmother should be available to help care for grandchildren), this does not mean that grandmothers interpret and fulfil them in the same way. All of the interviewed grandmothers were aware of the normative expectation that a 'good' grandmother should always be willing and ready to help care for grandchildren and this expectation was among all of them reflected in their subjective conceptualisation of the grandmother role. However, for some of them this norm represented a means by which to distance themselves from the stereotypical representation of ageing. The emphasis on an active lifestyle as an alternative measure of 'good' grandmothering was typical primarily of women with a higher level of education, living in towns and who had the opportunity, as well as the economic and cultural capital, to fulfil this image of an active grandmother. As shown in a study by Vidovičová, Galčanová and Petrová Kafková (2015), education levels may also influence how much someone identified with the normative expectation associated with the role of grandparent. The results of their quantitative study show that among Czech seniors agreement with the statement that 'being a full-time grandmother/grandfather is outdated' increases with the level of education (27% of seniors with a university degree agree, compared to just 19% of seniors with basic education). However, this does not mean that seniors with higher education tend to be less-intensive grandparents. Rather, they tend to be less inclined to adhere to the traditional expectation that the grandparent role should fill the majority of their time in older age (Vidovičová, Galčanová and Petrová Kafková 2015: 769).

Our study suggests that the current emphasis on being active as a precondition for happy and healthy ageing (*e.g.* Katz 2000) also influences ideas about how the role of grandmother should be fulfilled. The idea of an active lifestyle represented a significant framework for the cultural script of grandmothering that the mothers articulated. The close association made between the role of the grandmother and introducing a child to new interests, activities and adventures suggests that current representations of active ageing also have the potential to redefine traditional gender expectations associated with the role of grandparent. As previous studies have shown (*e.g.* Mann 2007; Tarrant 2012), being active, performing outdoor activities with grandchildren and introducing children to new interests were things mainly associated with the role of grandfather, while the role of grandmother was conceptualised mainly as the provision of primary care. However, in our analysis, the normative expectation that grandparents should be active was applied by mothers to all grandparents regardless of their gender. In this respect, this representation of grandparenting also has emancipatory potential and can open up space for the performance of the role of grandmother outside the domestic sphere and primary care.

On the other hand, the normative framework of the grandmother role as 'being active' strongly connects the grandparental role with the 'third age'. It presents a vision of the ideal grandparent that is privileged in many regards. Even though the idea that a grandmother should also have a life of her own and not devote herself solely to caring for grandchildren is a welcome change to the way in which the grandparental role has traditionally been constructed, these new normative notions also include a rather narrow definition of what the role of the ideal grandmother is. Although these normative representations of grandmothering may broaden the range of meanings associated with the grandmother role and old age in general, they at the same time create a new set of normative expectations that more restrictively and more narrowly define what is expected from the role of grandmother.

The 'being active' norm was stressed less by the grandmothers than by the mothers in the interviews. However, in cases where a grandmother did conceptualise their role in the terms of 'being active grandmothers', the 'being active' norm represented a crucial framework for their representations of 'good' grandmothering. They presented their active lifestyle as something that makes them more interesting and inspiring for their grandchildren and as a feature that distinguishes them from the 'average' grandmother. In this respect, many previous studies have pointed out that the emphasis on an active life is often made by older people as a way of distancing themselves from the negative stereotypical images of old age as well as from their peers (Hurd 1999; Lund and Engelsrud 2008; Townsend, Godfrey and Denby 2006). An active lifestyle thus serves as a significant source of self-

esteem in older age. However, as we showed in our previous research, this positive self-esteem may also form the basis for the creation of new hierarchies amongst different representations and experiences of ageing. In this respect, an active lifestyle may function not only as a source of self-esteem but also as a way in which to establish one's own (superior) position in relation to other lifestyles in older age (Hasmanová Marhánková 2010). The women in our study who referred to themselves as 'active grandmothers' perceived their active lifestyle as a form of capital or added value that they can offer their grandchildren and that makes them different from 'other' grandmothers.

Our study highlights the need to pay further attention to the current representations of active ageing, which may present new challenges for the performance of the grandparent role. A vision of ageing that is filled with work, hobbies and time for one's own interests is in potential conflict with the continuing imperative that the older generation help care for their grandchildren (Arber and Timonen 2012: 252). Moreover, associating 'good' grandmothering with the notion of third age further stigmatises those who are not able to fulfil the idealised vision of ageing associated with an active lifestyle, relatively good health, sufficient economic resources and the free time to invest in their grandchildren.

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NOTES

- 1 The study by Petrová Kafková (2010) has drawn attention to a weakening of the norm about a parent's obligation towards his or her own children. Whereas in 1991, 72 per cent of Czech seniors agreed with the statement that parents have to do everything for their children, in 2008 only 57 per cent of seniors agreed. Seniors, compared to the young generation, are still the group with the stronger sense of normative solidarity. Nevertheless, she concludes that the previous norm of 'self-sacrifice' of the older generation to the younger generation is no longer widely accepted in Czech society.
- 2 In six cases both mothers and grandmothers (within one family) were interviewed. We used the comparison of the perspectives of mothers and

grandmothers from the same family mainly in another part of our analysis on negotiating grandparents' involvement in caring for young children.

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