IT IS A SATISFACTION TO TAKE CARE OF MY GRANDCHILDREN: INFORMAL CARE OF CUCU AMONG MALAY GRANDMOTHERS IN KUCHING

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ABSTRACT

Despite the relatively high degree of research in formal care settings or licensed services, there remains lack of research on issues faced by the informal care providers. Grandparents are by far the greatest providers of informal child care, yet little is known about their experiences or factors associated with this type of care and its implications. The rise in the number of maternal employment is seen as being among the most significant changes to have affected family organisation. There are several popular assumptions that may be held by the general public: that grandmothers are overburden and stressed looking after their cucu. This study sought to determine the profile and the prevalence of grandmothers providing extensive care for grandchildren. Using a sample of three grandmothers aged 58, 62 and 65 years old, this paper explores the voices of grandmothers in taking care of their grandchildren. This paper thus highlights some of the experiences of the grandmothers including the thoughts of the descendents, the rewarding side and the roles and expectations. As the informal care by grandparents is increasingly popular, the research outcomes will have important implications to the extant literature on grandparents taking care of their grandchildren.

Keywords: Grandparents, Childcare, Grandchildren, Grandparenting, Career

INTRODUCTION

Over the past ten years, the percentage of women in the workforce increased slowly to 47% in 2013. According to Malaysian population and family survey 4, a type of support mostly needed by working women in Sarawak is child care centre which comprised of 43% other than supporting in term of subsidy on child care cost of 23% (Aminah, Anjili & Ismahalil, 2008). Previous study by Surena (2012) shown that almost half of the professional women did get support from parents (60%), close relative (25%) and in laws (15%).

Grandparents are by far the greatest providers of informal child care, yet little is known about how grandparents view this role. Insights into grandparents’ experiences have the potential to inform child providers and family policy makers. Child care falls into the categories of formal and informal care. Formal care refers to licensed services; informal care encompasses, among other things, care by relatives and, in particular, by grandparents. Surprisingly, despite the relatively high degree of research in formal care settings, there remains lack of research on issues faced by the informal care providers.
Many grandparents choose to babysit their young grandchildren while the parents of these children work – with mothers’ employment being the main reason why grandmothers (and some grandfathers) accept the responsibility for child care on a regular basis (ABS, 2003). Other grandparents may feel obligated to provide such care. Malaysians are relationship-oriented (Abdullah, 1996). Their lives are embedded in a complex web of ties to family, village, country, and/or social group, where mutual and reciprocal obligations are clearly understood and acted upon.

**Research on Grandparental Care**

Comprehensive study on grandparental care in Malaysia is only beginning to develop over the past few years. In Asia, extended families is widely practiced due to collectivist culture. In contrast to individualistic cultures, individuals in a collectivist culture, which is by definition group-oriented, offer social support as a duty or obligation (Triandis, 1995) rather than as a voluntary action or just as a good deed. The values of collectivism, such as the importance of family, the concept of filial piety and support from extended families mould the experience of grandparents. Family is the most important in-group in collectivist cultures (Hofstede, 1994; Triandis, 1995), and whatever happens in or to the family affects the individual. Moreover, the family in collectivist cultures includes not only the immediate members but also the extended members – aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws, nieces and nephews (Noordin et al., 2002). Because of the importance placed on of each individual’s contribution to the collective and the fact that a ‘built-in’ support system is always available, there is more opportunity for people to receive social support from the family in non-western cultures than in western cultures.

According to Department of Statistics, in 2000, Sarawak is one of the state that has a higher rate of extended family which is 28.1% compared to Sabah (24.5%) and Peninsular Malaysia (20.3%). Hence, this phenomenon has affected the life styles in extended families and children care. The support from grandparents to care for the children is still the popular option among working mothers. According to Aminah et al., (2008), the mutual support among Malays are prone to mothers compared to the fathers due to gender factor and it is more comfortable to seek help from mothers or sisters compared to the paternal family members. She also found that such phenomenal is universal as daughters are close to the mothers and leads the mothers to care for their children due to filial affection.

Mothers or mother in laws who have retired at the age of 56 or 56 years old are sometimes involve in their grandchildren care. From positive aspect, both side will benefit. Research shows that grandmothers can provide a safe, comfortable and can instil good values to the grandchildren (Rahimah, 2007). The grandchildren will fulfil their lives and they will not feel lonely. However, the commitment with their grandchildren could be the limiting factors restricting grandparents’ social activities (Rahimah, 2007).

With continuing changes in family composition and the rise in maternal employment, it is possible that grandparents may be the only significant and stable family members in the lives of many young children. A study of 20 grandparents living in a middle-class locality within the Sydney metropolitan area identified ways in which the experiences of those grandparents were “rewriting the script” of grand motherhood (Wearing & Wearing, 1996). These researchers drew conclusions from their study suggesting that the basic characteristics of “good” grandmothers were that they had more time to give their grandchildren than they did their own children, and were patient, caring and supportive. While some grandmothers provided child care to enable the child’s parents to gain employment, they also balanced their child care and personal roles and so had an independent life that included paid and/or voluntary work as well as being involved in leisure activities. In a study undertaken with 36 Vietnamese families (Vo-Thanh-Xuan & Liamputtong, 2003) immigrants, the grandparents in this study were faced with having to address both cultural and generational expectations in relation to their role as grandparents. In addition to personal concerns, some of the common themes that arose from in-depth interviews with three grandparents and focus group discussions were: the heterogeneity of grandparents and grandparenting; the role that parents play as gatekeepers in giving grandparents access to their grandchildren; and the positive support and negative stress aspects of the arrangements.
Dunifon (2012) in her study on the influence of grandparents on the lives of children reviewed recent research and discuss directions for research. She considered the role of nonresidential grandparents in children’s lives, grandparents’ influence in three-generational families, and the well-being of families in which grandparents are raising their grandchildren. Research regarding the influence of nonresident grandparents on children is inconclusive, with several studies indicating no or negligible roles for grandparents in such families. Studies of three-generational families suggest that children in such arrangements often fare just as well as children in married families, although these patterns vary by race. Finally, new research highlights areas of need and strength in custodial grandparent families and future research seeks to examine how these factors relate to children’s well-being.

Rahimah (2007) in discussing issues and challenges of grandparenting in Malaysia highlighted that the cost of child care is relatively increasing nowadays. Therefore, the grandmothers are the ‘available’ support for the young parents. She listed a few of positive aspects for the grandmothers including becoming as role model and involve in instilling the good values to the grandchildren. Grandchildren can also become their companions. However, this study also determined some of the challenging aspect including the lack of ‘private time’ of the grandparents, some reported the alleviating stress in dealing with the children, and some grandparents tend to spoil the grandchildren which may then lead to some miscommunications among parents.

This Study

With the goal of eliciting the in-depth emotional experience of grandmothers, interviews were conducted with three Malay grandmothers aged 58, 62 and 65 years old in June and July, 2014. They were caring after their grandchildren aged between 6 months and 7 years old. The sampling frame was located in Kuching, Sarawak. This research paradigm was constructed from a phenomenological psychological stance, allowing grandmothers’ experiences to speak for themselves. A qualitative approach was used in this study because it enabled existential insights into the lived experience from the perspective of grandmothers and privileged their voices. The participants’ accounts of their grandparenting experiences, tape recorded in the semi-structured interviews, were transcribed verbatim and subjected to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

The names of the participants remain anonymous so as to protect their privacy. For the purpose of this paper, we call them Nenek S, Nenek P and Nenek N. It is important to mention here that the interviews were conducted in the preferred language chosen by the participants. In the case of Nenek P and Nenek N, both of them prefer to converse mostly in English though there are instances when code-switching happens especially when we are talking about things that are related to Malay culture or Malay understanding of certain things. As for Nenek S, the preferred language was Malay and in this case, the first author did the translation to English. Table below provides some notes on the profile of all three participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Notes about the participant</th>
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<tr>
<td>Nenek S</td>
<td>Nenek S is in her late 50's and a housewife. She lives with her 3 grandchildren aged 6 months, 2 years and 7 years old. She had been looking after the children since they were born. During day time, Nenek S and her husband will be at home with their grandchildren until their parents back from work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nenek P</td>
<td>Nenek P is currently looking after a 3 years 8 months, and a 1 year old granddaughters. She is a retired teacher for about six years already. She currently lives with her grandchildren together with her husband, her son and daughter in law. They have an Indonesian maid for about two years already.</td>
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Nenek N helped to care for her 2 years and 7 months grandson and an 8 months grandson. She is going to be 65 years old. She claimed she is taking turn with her husband in taking care of their grandchildren. They are all staying in a bungalow together with her single sister in law aged 60 years old who helped quite a lot with the house chores.

Grandmothers’ Experiences

The preliminary analysis of the interview transcriptions reveals three major themes in understanding grandmothers’ experiences caring for their grandchildren. They are the thoughts of the descendants, the rewarding aspects and the roles and expectations.

a. Thoughts of the Descendants

*Kita ngenang cucu dengan ngenang anak juak* or the thoughts of the descendants is a common phrase that the grandmothers would refer to in talking about the reason why they ended-up taking care of their grandchildren. Evidence in this study suggests that all participants *ngenang* or *berkenang*, in this regard means the sentiments for sympathy towards the working mothers (in this case the daughters) and also the growing grandchildren. Nenek S emphasized a few time during the conversation that her granddaughter was still very small and she did not have a heart to send such a small kid to a nursery.

*I don’t feel burden because after all she’s the daughter to my daughter. To send to other places, she is still very small, she does not understand anything yet* (Nenek S)

During the interview, Nenek P occasionally reported her concern with the reports in the media nowadays.

*It is very difficult to find a good helper, there are horror stories of kids choke to death, those could be isolated case, but if we can, try to avoid. If there is anything happen, we cry all the tears and even if you have all money in the world, you cannot bring them back.* (Nenek P)

In addition, Nenek N indicated that grandparents can reassure the kids safety. Her daughter is a busy professional, working as an engineer. The importance of looking after her grandchildren, she quoted that the grandparents could be the “surveillance eyes” and reassure the children safety.

b. The Rewarding Side

One of the consistent finding in this study was that the participants always expressed their feeling of satisfaction when taking care of their grandchildren. Nenek S shared a lot on her grandson achievement and development. She occasionally repeated the word satisfaction during the interview as illustrated below;

*It is just amazing. You feel a lot of joy, satisfaction, I don’t know but I get satisfaction to see him, some of the disciplines he understand* (Nenek N)

Nenek P reported how she enjoyed taking care of her granddaughters. Taking care of her cucu is a positive experience for her. She stated that she is the one who feel lucky because her son and daughter in law are willing to share their lives and the children with her. She values the time and close relationship with her granddaughters. She personally expressed that she found that it is a good thing to take care of the kids because it makes her feel young, she got to play and laugh with the kids.

*I do enjoy having the kids around. It makes sense you know after that, you feel happy, you feel fulfilment.* (Nenek P)
A lot of satisfaction, it is a satisfaction to me to see the kids grow. (Nenek P)

The participants revealed that they are willing to take care of their grandchildren until they are unable to do so. Nenek S narrated that she is willing to let go of her job if her daughter can find somebody who is ‘better’ than her.

c. The Roles and Expectations

The current study revealed that the grandparents are taking care of their grandchildren on what we called as “part-time” basis. Nenek P and Nenek S are currently having assistance from helper in the house. The grandmothers admitted that they could not do the job if they were to do it full time without any help with other house chores. According to Nenek N, she sort of bahagi-bahagi or alternatively take turn with her husband to watch over the children. She still continues with her NGO works related, attending meeting and so on. This is parallel with Nenek P who is helped very much by her husband and also a maid they hired.

...with the alternatives such that I have my free time and my husband also need to go for a meeting too (Nenek N)

I go jogging or walking everyday in the morning, morning is ‘my’ time. From 6 until 8 a.m, its my time (Nenek P)

The participants explained that their roles as more towards ‘surveillance’ and not as disciplinarians. The grandmothers in this study aware that they are sometimes being permissive and tend to pamper their grandchildren as compared to the parents. The grandmothers involves informally with the children early education. They also develop the routines among the grandchildren. All grandmothers expressed their expectation of having a good and reliable child care centre. For example, Nenek P described what a good child centre is,

They need to be well train in term of first aid, not only on child development. For the kids who stay after school, the nutritionist should be there (Nenek P)

DISCUSSION

The analysis of this in-depth interview yielded that the grandmothers’ experience were marked by thought or sympathy towards the daughters and the grandchildren. With the increasing number of women participation in the workforce, the family struggle with child care issues. The cost is getting expensive and it is always an obstacle for a low and medium income families. Even though the grandmothers admitted that they were given some money by their children to look after their grandchildren but it is in fact unnecessary. They use the money mainly for the house expenses. This finding is consistent with a research done by Rahimah (2007); Hank and Buber (2009) that one of the reasons the grandparents look after their grandchildren is due to the increasing cost of sending a child to a child care centre. The thought of the huge burden by the working mothers is kind of a trigger for the grandmothers to agree being the care provider. Other than that, due to the negative portray of child care related issues in the mass media is a hindrance factor of sending a child at a centre.

The kin relationship and the emotional availability became quite clear throughout the conversation with the grandmothers. A mother always helps the daughter as much as possible. Nenek S was saying “not like I am doing them favour, no such thing”. She helped because she perceived her role as being a mother and responsive to her grandchildren. The participants experienced support from their immediate family member including her husband and relative. According to Hassan, Dollard and Winefield (2010), in a collectivistic society, basic personal and interpersonal support is a duty therefore, it is not surprising grandmothers place a high value on having more time to spend with grandchildren and taking care of them. Another important point to note is that, in collectivist cultures, filial piety is overriding (Triandis, 1995). For the grandmothers, taking care of their grandchildren in a physical sense is obligatory, a responsibility also rooted in religion (Hassan
et al., 2010). Care within the extended family is paramount, as evidenced by a deep reluctance to use nursing homes as alternative care for elderly parents, which is a common, if reluctant solution, for many western families (Yusof, 2006). Having established that an individual’s personal happiness comes second to collectivist ideals in Malaysia (Abdullah, 1996), it is not surprising that caring for family and grandchildren is identified as the most important social aspect affecting person’s well-being (Choi, 2005).

Evidence in this study suggests that all grandmothers reported satisfaction feeling and fulfilment in taking care of their grandchildren. All three participants reported the feeling of joy and happiness to care for their own children. This finding is parallel with research done by Woodbridge (2008) and Dunifon (2013) who found that grandmothers provide emotional and instrumental support for their grandchildren. Woodbridge emphasised that the grandchildren feel safe and are provided with unconditional loves by their grandparents. Dunifon in her review of recent research indicated that grandmothers are the role model for their grandchildren, provide early education to their grandchildren, teach them the acceptable and unacceptable behaviours and support the children morally. The recent finding is also consistent with study done by Goodfellow and Laverty (2003) in their research among 20 grandparents living in a middle-class locality within Sydney metropolitan, the grandmothers found caring for grandchildren a positive and satisfying experience.

This study is consistent with previous findings where the majority of participants can develop close relationship with their grandchildren and fulfil their lives instead of being lonely grandmothers. Clearly, for the participants, the time spent with their cucu is kind of “part time” basis only. This is because they agreed to take care of their grandchildren but at the same time they need to plan their time. Nenek P and Nenek N both have a helper at home and both nenek agreed that they could not do it if they were to be a full time keeper. As Nenek P occasionally mentioned, “we are no longer mobile”. In this context, the grandmothers’ expectations are that as long as they can develop the routines with the grandchildren, things would be much easier, with the assistant of a helper in the house. Having personal time and free time was valued by grandparents. Therefore, it is not surprising that grandparents found helper or maid in the house as an advantage and rewarding. This finding is parallel to Milward (1998) interviews with 323 grandmothers which revealed that 95 only looked after their grandchildren at least once a week. They do not likely to have responsibility for the care of their grandchildren on a regular basis because while many of these grandmothers spoke positively about their role, others were somewhat ambivalent about their responsibility, and they expect their adult children to be able to balance work and family.

Clearly the grandparents in this study experienced positively about their role. The reason the grandmothers accept the responsibility for child care is because they feel obligated to do so. It is a kind of an automatic expectation that they take up the role of being a child care provider. The grandparents most often negotiated the child care arrangement with their daughters or daughters-in-law to enabling them to participate in the workforce. The grandmothers were patient, caring and supportive but not interfering in the raising of their grandchildren.

The implication of the current study is that cultural and familial stereotypes should be explored in understanding the grandmothers and the preconceived assumptions and negative conceptions are not necessarily true for this group of women. Greater sensitivity to their needs as grandparents is also required amongst family members, friends and the community. Moreover, from both a psychological and social perspective, there is a need to educate people that not all grandmothers are experiencing difficulties and challenges in caring for their grandchildren.

**CONCLUSION**

It should be noted that, to date, there has been little psychological research which has explored and documented grandmothers’ lived experiences concerning psychosocial cultural factors affecting their decision to care for their grandchildren. This is perhaps reflective of psychology’s issues of this group of grandmothers in a collectivistic society. Both in clinical practise and in research, there is a significant gap in understanding
the grandparents caring for children populations. Thus, findings from this research contributed to the body of knowledge theoretically and in practice pertaining to grandmothers’ experience in taking care of their cucu.

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