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# SURROGATE GRANDPARENTS AS ACTORS IN INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Current social changes that also affect the situation in the Czech Republic have raised considerable interest in intergenerational learning and in the senior generation as participants in it. The very forms that the lives of seniors assume are undergoing radical changes, as is their role in the family. In addition to the grandparent role lived within the biological family, in which an individual becomes a grandparent at the moment their children become parents, there are alternative grandparent roles. One example of this is “surrogate grandparenthood,” i.e. one reflecting a social rather than biological relationship between the child and the senior. In the present text, we link the topic of intergenerational learning and surrogate grandparenthood. The questions we asked were: How does intergenerational learning take place? What is the role of surrogate grandmothers as actors in the process of intergenerational learning? What is the content of this learning, i.e. what is transmitted within intergenerational learning? What are the methods used in this kind of learning? To qualify as intergenerational learning in our study, learning had to take place between the surrogate grandmother and the mother in the family where the surrogate grandparenting was provided.*

## Keywords

*intergenerational learning, senior, grandparent roles, surrogate grandparenthood, qualitative research*

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## Introduction

Societal changes in the Czech Republic and elsewhere in recent decades are based especially on the demographic change referred to as population aging, on the transformations to the traditional family, and on the change of the broader social context resulting from transitioning to a society with a requirement for lifelong (and lifewide) learning. These changes have also raised considerable interest in intergenerational learning and in the senior generation as participants in it. The very forms that the lives of seniors assume are undergoing a radical rebirth, as is their role in the family. In addition to the grandparent role lived within the biological family, in which an individual becomes a grandparent at the moment their children become parents (cf. e.g. Matějček, 1997), there are alternative grandparent roles (cf. Hayslip, Henderson, & Shore, 2003). One example of this is “surrogate grandparenthood,” i.e. one reflecting a social rather than biological relationship between the child and the senior. Surrogate grandparenthood is mainly connected with seniors wishing to actively experience the grandparent role and yet not being able to for some reason. Such reasons include that younger generations delay parenthood and that grandparents often live far from their biological grandchildren due to the increasing work mobility of the middle and younger generations. Aspects concerning the parent generation as well as changes concerning the older generation have contributed to the emergence of surrogate grandparenthood. The acute lack of capacity in state-run and financially more affordable day care centers and kindergartens has led to difficulties for parents wishing to return to work, i.e. a need to look for other acceptable forms of care for their children. The offer of surrogate grandparenthood from seniors can help meet the childcare demands of the parent generation.

Since its beginnings in the late 1960s (cf. Vanderven, 2004), research in intergenerational learning has been associated especially with the biological family environment. The theoretical pillar has thus logically been the study of kin relationships. Attention has been focused primarily on the axis connecting the parent and the child, on the frequency of contact and the potential intergenerational conflict between them. It is evident (Cherri, 2008; Kamanová, 2009) that research attention is being increasingly attracted by intergenerational transfer skipping a generation, i.e. between grandparents and grandchildren. This is most likely due to the current general interest in issues relating to population aging and in conceptualizing and redefining the grandparent role (Katz, Lowenstein, & Werner, 1998), in efforts for social inclusion of the senior generation, and in the search for ways to help this generation live and age actively. The topics have included value transmission and the importance of the grandparent role and its influence on child development (Hanks & Ponzetti, 2004).

With reference to the postmodern variability in family life and the ways the familial roles are lived, the research topics include responses to the demographic and societal changes mentioned above. The subject of this paper, intergenerational learning in surrogate grandparents, specifically surrogate grandmothers, a new, not yet researched topic in the Czech Republic, is also among these topics.

To capture this topic in our research, we took advantage of the Trefoil project, within which surrogate grandparenthood was experienced by senior women playing the role of surrogate grandmothers, having entered a family they had no biological links with and taking care of the family's preschool-aged children, naturally interacting also with these children's parents. The questions we asked were: How does intergenerational learning take place? What is the role of surrogate grandmothers as actors in the process of intergenerational learning? What is the content of this learning, i.e. what is transmitted within intergenerational learning? What are the methods used in this kind of learning? To qualify as intergenerational learning in our study, learning had to take place between the surrogate grandmother and the mother in the family where the surrogate grandparenting was provided.

### **Seniors as actors in the life of society**

The ongoing population aging is regarded as one of the most significant demographic changes in human history. In particular, European (including Czech) society is aging dynamically. This trend has been caused by the "second transition," consisting of diminishing birth rates combined with increasing life expectancy (Petrová & Kafková, 2013). Population aging means that the population contains increasing numbers and shares of people regarded as "old" in both relative and absolute terms. The process of population aging in the Czech Republic is evidenced by some select data. As the "Population Projection" report issued by the Czech Statistical Office (2013) states, the age index, i.e. the number of seniors per 100 children, has been increasing significantly in the Czech Republic over the past 50 years, with the number of seniors exceeding the number of children in 2007. The population structure remains stable in this respect and the age index can be expected to grow further in the future. The index reached a value of 113 in 2013, with 113 seniors above 65 per every 100 children under 15. It is estimated that the index will reach a value of 150 by the mid-2020s.

The high shares of elderly people in the population may be perceived as a problem or as an opportunity. These people require increasing care, including services and investments of all kinds (financial, personal, and emotional); on the other hand, they may provide a number of invaluable

benefits for families and society on the whole. It is not an either-or situation because all of the processes caused by and associated with aging are interconnected and highly individualized. Seniors are not a uniform group to be approached with a stereotypical attitude based on the assumption that they are a group predisposed to be dependent on younger groups. On the contrary, the lifestyles of seniors vary widely. Currently there is a focus on the concept of active seniorhood and on other concepts presenting seniors as active agents within their families as well as in society. The involvement of seniors in volunteer activities has been rising (Frič & Pospíšilová, 2010). Pilot research undertaken within the *50plus* project (2011), a 2010 survey involving 2,020 Czech citizens aged 50–70, shows that nearly 40% of senior respondents felt inclined to work as volunteers, with 21% expressing a strong interest in this activity. It was mainly younger seniors with secondary-school education and women who were willing to help free of charge. The respondents were most interested in involvement in non-profit work (35%). Intergenerationally, the target groups these senior respondents wanted to help was interesting: 32% of respondents were interested in taking care of seniors while 22% preferred working with young people (*50plus* project, 2011).

### Seniors as family life actors

Along with the changing role of seniors in society, their role in the family, i.e. the grandparent role, is changing. The grandparent role is sometimes referred to as “a role without a role” (Kivett in Pfeifer & Sussman, 1991), as it lacks a clearly defined content, function, or style. It is rather variable and met in ways so diverse that its realizations are highly individualized.

Psychological studies dealing with this topic indicate the determining importance of the acceptance of their grandparenthood by the grandparents themselves, which is influenced by their age and occupational situation. For many adults, grandparenthood represents a clear-cut group identity or role within the family: it is a personal and social identity-confirming tool, a tool for satisfying one’s creativity, self-fulfillment, and competence; it helps structure time and provides stability in life. Additionally, grandparenthood may play a compensatory role for men and women who did not have enough time to fulfill their parenting duties.

The requirement that the grandparent role be well-timed is discussed by Pfeifer and Sussman (1991), and by Harper, Smith, and Hagestad (2010). They regard this factor as even more important than biological age. If a senior person becomes a grandparent at the right time, they may prepare for the

role well, reassess their priorities and expectations, and be ready to assume this new role. In consequence, the likelihood that the new role might be in conflict with other roles is diminished. The right timing is equally important for the whole family which can, thanks to this, provide the grandparent with more support and acknowledgment. The family itself, especially the parent generation, determines how the grandparent is to act in the process of the socialization of the grandchildren (Pfeifer & Sussman, 1991). In addition to the individual factors influencing the interpretation of the grandparent role, the cultural conditioning of the role should also be mentioned. For instance, Možný (2004) discusses the lifelong parent role, especially in women, who do not stop taking care of the younger generation when their own children grow up but carry on taking care of and bringing up their grandchildren. The author describes the strong intergenerational solidarity that originated in the communist era in the Czech Republic, when helping the procreational family in various respects was something very natural for the original family. Input in the form of being involved in the run of the family is evidenced, for instance, by data from a 2004 report on the forms of help provided by people ages 45 to 59 for their children. The most frequent form was household work. Help in taking care of the grandchildren was also strongly represented: one third of respondents helped whenever it was necessary, one third occasionally, and a third rarely or never (*National Report on Family*, 2004).

On the other hand, involvement of biological grandparents in taking care of their grandchildren may be problematic for several reasons. Young age cohorts, still active on the labor market, can currently be observed entering the grandparent role. The retirement age in the Czech Republic is calculated using a progressive model, e.g. the retirement age of a man born in 1945 is 61 years and 8 months, while the retirement age of a man born in 1960 is 64 years and 2 months, etc. The number of children is a factor in determining the retirement age for women. Grandparents often fall into a “sandwich generation” category: their children need them to help take care of the grandchildren, but due to the increasing lifespan, which is currently 75 years for men and 81 for women, their own parents also need their help. The commonality of this kind of care is evidenced, for instance, in research by Sýkorová (2007). Another factor is the geographical distance between grandparents and the children. The contemporary Czech family is often neo-local, because new families settle down at great distances from the original ones, for instance because of better job opportunities. Grandparents’ involvement in the care of their grandchildren may thus be complicated. All this opens up opportunities for surrogate grandparenting, a role chosen by its participants voluntarily rather than assigned by external conditions.

### Young families as the other side of the coin

Alongside the discussion of the transformation of society and family in connection with population aging, it is necessary to mention the second aspect of the issue, the parent generation. This generation opens the space for the surrogate grandparent role for multiple reasons.

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Czech society was experiencing a sea change – cultural, demographic, and societal. As has been mentioned, the demographic changes have especially affected the family, causing a transformation of family networks and the life rhythms of family members (Hagestad & Herlofson, 2006; Newman, 1993). As the population pyramid changes, with its base narrowing and the top widening, the family pyramid is changing as well. It is getting longer and slenderer and the pyramid is thus gradually becoming a beanpole (Bengtson & Lowenstein, 2003). The underlying causes are diminishing fertility<sup>2</sup> and increasing life expectancy, thanks to the improving health of the population age of mothers at the birth of their first child (29.8 years on average) (*Czech Statistical Office*, 2014). This demographic situation shortens the duration of certain life roles, such as parenting a number of dependent children or siblinghood (as there is less likelihood of siblings), while lengthening the time spent in partnership without children, as the parent of a dependent child, as a grandparent, or as a grandchild or a sibling (if one has siblings). Thanks to all this, people have more opportunities to develop intergenerational relationships, and hence more chances to acquire information and experience through intergenerational learning (Benokraitis, 2002). They live and will continue to live their lives in intergenerational rather than intragenerational contact, for sustained periods of time.

The context of family life is shaped to a considerable extent by the prevailing attitudes and measures of the welfare state. Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, state interventions and responsibilities grew, especially in advanced economies, although they were reduced recently in response to economic developments, when expenditures of the welfare state to support family life were being cut. The responsibility of families for their own situation is again being emphasized (Bengtson & Lowenstein, 2003). This trend is to a certain extent reflected even in the attitude of the Czech state towards the care of preschool children (up to six years of age). In recent years, there has been a significant lack of capacity in state-run daycare centers and

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<sup>2</sup> The average number of children per woman in the Czech Republic is 1.46. The mean age of mothers at the birth of their first child is 29.8. (*Czech Statistical Office*, 2014).

kindergartens, which provide care for children from six months and three years, respectively, up to age six. This kind of care involves minimum expenditures for the family, usually in the order of a flat-rate fee of few hundred Czech crowns and a payment for food. The parents, usually the mother, thus either have to delay their return to work and carry on taking care of the child themselves even after the three-year parental leave, or use another form of care for the children. Biological grandparents often cannot assume responsibility for the care due to many of the above-mentioned factors. Commercial preschool care institutions are an option but their use is often complicated by the economic situation of the family. The fees are often thousands of Czech crowns. This creates a scope for surrogate grandparenthood, which combines the positive points of being in contact with the oldest generation, supporting intergenerational learning, and incurring minimum expenditures. Surrogate grandparenting is usually provided for families through projects undertaken by NGOs, and the expenditures are usually the equivalent of what parents would pay in a state-run kindergarten.

### **On intergenerational learning**

Intergenerational learning is a process through which individuals of all ages acquire knowledge and skills as well as attitudes and values, from daily experience, all possible kinds of sources, and all of the influences in the worlds they live in (Hatton Yeo, 2008). Fisher (2008) defines intergenerational learning similarly, as “a practice that aimed to bring people together in purposeful, mutually beneficial activities, which promoted greater understanding and respect between generations and could contribute to building more cohesive communities.” What therefore distinguishes intergenerational learning from other types of learning is its focus on the individual participants, members of different generations, who actively enter the process of learning. These may be two successive generations as well as generations skipping another one. We could certainly agree with a number of authors dealing with intergenerational learning, such as Ramon and Turrini (2008), who have pointed out that intergenerational learning is, in fact, just a present-day reference for passing on/acquiring legacy from ancestors, within which social and cultural knowledge is transmitted from the older to the younger generations. It is, however, necessary to take a further step in this kind of thought, especially in connection with developments in information technologies and the changing roles of the younger and older generations. These developments and changes lead us to view intergenerational learning as a two-way process of transmitting knowledge, skills, and experience between generations.



Karl Mannheim (2007) describes the process of knowledge transfer from one generation to another as a *de facto* unconscious and involuntary transmission of contents, stating that “they are instilled without the teacher or pupil knowing” (Mannheim, 2007). Both kinds of learning, conscious and unconscious, may be involved in the process of intergenerational learning. When processes of and conditions for intergenerational learning are explored, it is difficult to discern unconscious learning in ways other than by retrospective identification, which is marked by a degree of subjectivity, i.e. our research activity is oriented towards the learning reflected by its participants.

As for the types of learning listed by Průcha (2005), i.e. sensory motor, verbal-cognitive, and social learning, intergenerational learning includes all of them – with varying emphasis, in varying directions, and with varying intensities. In the context of our topic, social learning is the most interesting because it far exceeds the systemic opportunities arising in formal (school) education. Family and the family environment are the most favorable to social learning because this is where the systems of values, norms, attitudes, communication, and negotiation skills needed in occupational and other groups and environments as well as in the family are acquired.

Although intergenerational learning may also be explored in community or occupational contexts, it primarily takes place in the family. By intergenerational learning in the context of family life, we mean the phenomena and processes enhancing the bi-directional (mutual) transfer of knowledge, experience, and attitudes within the family. It is therefore learning taking place in specific family life situations, interactions, and joint activities of the participating generations (children, parents, and grandparents). In our research survey, the focus is on intergenerational learning, not in the biological family in which the grandparent role is performed, but in a social family, i.e. a family where the biological links between the individual members, specifically between grandparents and parents with young children, are replaced with social links and where the role of a surrogate grandparent is performed.

### **The Trefoil project**

The Trefoil project is among the first intergenerational projects in the Czech Republic mediating the concept of surrogate grandparenting. The project team define the goal as “to support families, creating a relationship between a child and a mature woman, the latter of whom will enter the group and, ideally, become a new member of the family.” The project, undertaken by the NGO Center for Family and Social Care, which was established by the Brno Episcopate, in 2012–2014, is a variation on a number of other similar projects undertaken abroad. It is mainly based on the methodology

used by the Oma-Dienst service, created in Vienna in 1973 and instigated by the Catholic Family Association in Vienna.

Trefoil responds to the characteristics of the current Czech family as outlined above. Parents of young children (usually preschool children) are presented with the opportunity to meet a woman who will represent the oldest generation in the family by stepping in as a surrogate grandmother. This woman will develop a relationship with the family which combines elements of friendship and employment, being based on a personal relationship as well as on recommended remuneration. The price paid for this kind of childcare is lower than in the commercial environment, thanks to which the parents can invite the grandmother more frequently, giving her a chance to work again. Surrogate grandmothers get a chance to live their grandparent role as well as to earn a little money. They can extend and intensify their social contacts and expand other skills (such as first aid, PC skills, knowledge of child development, communication techniques, etc.) through free-of-charge workshops and training offered within the project.

Seniors, potential surrogate grandmothers, apply for the project themselves. They undergo an introductory interview with project staff focused on presenting the project and clarifying the expectations of the respective parties. The seniors also fill in a questionnaire focusing on their family history, childcare experience, etc. After signing an agreement of cooperation, the seniors are put on a list of available surrogate grandmothers. The families, or single mothers, undergo a similar entrance process. Project workers interview them to learn details concerning their families, and mutual expectations are matched with a view towards providing the children with the best care possible. Based on information from both parties, project workers arrange a meeting of the surrogate grandmother with the family. If both parties, the surrogate grandmother and the family, agree with the choice, the cooperation as such is initiated, its content being left up to the participants. The rules only set the minimum level of contact between the surrogate grandmother and the child at one session per week and stipulate that this contact should focus on providing care for the child, not household chores. During the cooperation, both parties may take advantage of activities organized within the project, e.g. participate in joint fun afternoon events or a variety of educational and development activities for the surrogate grandmothers.

### **Research methodology and environment**

The objective of our research was to examine the role of surrogate grandmothers as actors in the process of intergenerational learning. We were also interested in the contents of intergenerational learning and in the methods used in this

kind of learning. We explored intergenerational learning between surrogate grandmothers and the mothers of the children that the grandmothers were taking care of. Considering the form of the research questions, we opted for qualitative research methodology. Referring to Švaříček and Šedřová (2014) we may state that the goal of our research was to gain insight into how the protagonists themselves, i.e. the surrogate grandmothers, viewed the intergenerational learning situation and what led them to act as they did.

The selected research environment was the Trefoil project, which has been described above. The research environment was purposefully chosen to allow us to select features and/or processes fitting our research interest (Žižlavský, 2003). We selected an environment – Trefoil – in which we were able to examine surrogate grandparenting being lived and the role of surrogate mothers being performed. A very important person mediating our entry into the field was the Trefoil project coordinator, who helped us to reach the surrogate grandmothers. We approached the Trefoil project coordinator through email, and then a series of meetings followed in order to clarify our research plan and provide the participants with information about the research project. The project coordinator helped us to contact the surrogate grandmothers and the families in an informal way. We attended several fun afternoon events organized by the Center for Family and Social Care and were allowed to present our research plan at a meeting of all of the surrogate grandmothers involved in Trefoil. These activities, during which we communicated with the grandmothers and clarified our goals, proved to be a very important factor in motivating the grandmothers to become involved in our research and in creating a positive link to support an atmosphere of openness and trust in the interviews which were held later. All of the seniors who had been involved in the project for at least three months were approached. In this way, more than five surrogate grandmothers out of the 109 senior women who subscribed to the Trefoil project were approached.

To conduct the survey and to address the objectives we had set, we opted for semi-structured interviews as the principal method of data collection. This type of interview limits variations in questions, reducing the likelihood that data collected in individual interviews will exhibit significant structural differences. This makes the data easier to analyze because the individual topics are easier to identify in interview transcripts. The added advantage is that the backbone of the interview in terms of content can be supplemented by asking questions addressing other areas which prove to be important in the course of the interview. (Hendl, 2005) The core structure of the interview focused on topics connected with the circumstances of the interviewee's involvement in the Trefoil project, their own family background and the "surrogate" family, their perception of the role of the surrogate grandmother, the kind of relationship between the surrogate grandmother and the mother, and the form of intergenerational learning.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with grandmothers who had expressed their willingness to participate in the research. The characteristics of these eight senior women are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1

*Key characteristics of respondents*

<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>
Grandmother # 1 (Matylda)	73	Secondary school incl. A-levels
Grandmother # 2 (Anna)	73	Secondary school incl. A-levels
Grandmother # 3 (Sofie)	56	Secondary school incl. A-levels
Grandmother # 4 (Amálie)	58	Polytechnic
Grandmother # 5 (Lenka)	53	Apprenticeship with certificate
Grandmother # 6 (Jana)	66	Apprenticeship with certificate
Grandmother # 7 (Jitka)	61	University
Grandmother # 8 (Blanka)	63	Secondary school incl. A-levels

The technique of semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was selected. This type of interview limits variation among questions and thus reduces the likelihood of structural data differences between the individual interviews. The data is therefore easier to analyze as individual topics are easier to identify in the transcribed interview (Hendl, 2005). Supplementary questions to fill in some detailed information were also asked.

The respondents themselves chose where to meet us. The places included cafeterias, parks, and Family Point in Brno, i.e. spaces open to the public, especially to mothers and children, for eating and playing. The interviews took between 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted between February and May 2014. All of the respondents were assured that the information they provided would remain confidential and would be processed anonymously. They were also introduced to the purpose of the research and the intended use of the results based on the data they provided. The respondents were told that could refuse to answer any of the questions asked but none of them did. The atmosphere of the interviews was very friendly and open-minded. With the consent of the respondents, all of the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

After the verbatim transcription of the interviews, following Hendl (2005), the data were subjected to qualitative analysis. The material was open-coded by pencil-and-paper analysis in two subsequent phases. In the first phase, the transcripts were coded by one of the researchers involved in the pilot study. In the second phase, the codes were discussed at meetings with

other researchers, which led to partial re-coding. Then a list of all codes was compiled and the typology presented below<sup>3</sup> was created with the help of the constant comparison strategy and contrasting technique.

This methodological excursion should also include a note on the pilot study's limitations. The nature of the pilot study and its methodology do not allow us to make generalizations. We are aware that the respondent population is a small one; this is because although more potential respondents were addressed, additional respondents were not acquired. We are also aware that extending the interviews to the biological mothers of the children would provide a more integrated view of the particular area of intergenerational learning. We tried to contact them several times but they did not wish to participate. The main reported reason for their refusal to participate was their being very busy.

### **Research findings**

Our presentation of the research results will first focus on the role of surrogate grandmothers as participants in the process of intergenerational learning (between the surrogate grandmother and the mother in the family where surrogate grandparenting takes place), using a typology proposed by us. We will use the same typology to show how intergenerational learning occurs. Next, we will present the contents of intergenerational learning and what the contents of intergenerational learning influence. To conclude, we will focus on how intergenerational learning occurs, i.e. on the learning methods used.

### **Surrogate grandmothers as a learning source**

Viewing the concept of active seniorhood as a starting point, we examined surrogate grandmothers as active participants in intergenerational learning, i.e. as a learning source. Drawing on the interviews with the surrogate grandmothers, specific features can be used to identify several types of senior educators. The first feature is their attitude to learning, or to intergenerational learning; in other words, this feature describes how the grandmothers perceive themselves as educators. The second feature concerns the reasons that the

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<sup>3</sup> The first analytical story was obtained through the card game technique but the resulting categorization was not very functional. This is why we opted for the two above-mentioned methods.

grandmothers were trying to teach the mothers, i.e. the middle generation. The third feature, the “learner trigger,” characterizes the situations or needs of the grandmothers or mothers leading to the learning process. Another feature is the educator’s behavior towards the recipient, i.e. the mutual relationship of the two generations in terms of dominance and submissiveness. The last feature is behavior during learning, i.e. how both generations under observation behaved during intergenerational learning.

Table 2

*Typology of seniors as a learning source*

Type	Consultant	Partner	Strategist
Attitude to learning	“I am always ready to give advice.”	“It takes two people for learning to occur.”	“When I want to teach something, I need a strategy.”
Justification for teaching	Does not want to teach the mother unless she has asked for advice.	Likes to teach even when not asked by the mother. But mostly just shares.	Not directly asked to give advice but feels it is needed – offers it strategically so that the mother takes note of the information and is able to take it in.
Learning trigger	Mother’s articulated or suggested need for advice.	Each time the surrogate grandmother senses the mother’s potential need or the mother herself asks for advice.	Each time the surrogate grandmother senses the mother’s potential need.
Behavior to recipient	Submissive	Balanced	Dominant
Behavior during learning	Passive – one-directional The grandmother knows the mother needs advice. She does not give it, however, until the mother herself asks her to.	Active – two-directional The grandmother and the mother participate in learning with equal input and interest.	Active – one-directional The grandmother slips in a piece of advice without the mother having asked for it.

The first type we identified was the Consultant. The philosophy of surrogate grandmothers of this category is “I am always ready to give advice.” Surrogate grandmothers do not want to pass on experience unless the mother herself asks for it or expresses her need to learn. This can be seen in the example of SG2: “Like when she asks what I found useful. Then I tell her, I do, but giving out advice to everyone... not that.” The main learning trigger is thus the articulated or suggested need of the mother to receive advice from the surrogate grandmother and to learn something new: “You know what, I have some experience and I know about things from what I read. So unsolicited advice is the worst kind of advice there can be. So I always wait for her to send out a signal. Not that she [the mother] would ask directly ‘What do you think?’ But she may imply that she is interested. And I give her indirect advice. Which may be my own experience. And how she deals with it, whether she takes it as advice or complaint or – I don’t know – a memory, it’s up to her” (surrogate grandmother Jana). The behavior of this type of surrogate grandmother towards the mother can be classified as submissive. The Consultant surrogate grandmother always waits to be invited explicitly to provide advice or share her experience – the mother has a key influence on the intergenerational learning. Her behavior during learning is passive and one-sided as the surrogate grandmother knows that the mother needs the advice, but she gives it only when she has been asked for it. SG2 describes this aptly: “I’m this kind of person: I-know-it-all, I-have-seen-it-all, I-have-been-everywhere, so I would like to blurt it all out to end her trouble. But I cannot stand in her way like that, can I? I must only tell her what she asks for. Because otherwise I could hurt her feelings or something.” With Consultants, the experience of the surrogate grandmother as well as her social empathy and ability to empathize with the mother play important roles. This means that Consultant surrogate grandmothers consider unsolicited advice to be bad; to them, being ready to give advice is the best way to support the process of intergenerational learning between the surrogate grandmother and the mother.

The second type we identified is the Partner. Surrogate grandmothers of this type follow a philosophy which can be expressed as “It takes two people for learning to occur.” This means that the surrogate grandmother gives advice to the mother and teaches her but it is from the position of a partner rather than a mentor. They share experience and advice: “We deal with things together but she is very intelligent. It’s more like we talk about what we are going to do. One knows about this, the other about that, and we put it together” (surrogate grandmother Sofie). The learning trigger is situations in which a potential need of the mother to learn emerges or the mother asks for advice explicitly. Surrogate grandmother Matylda describes it as follows: “Yes, yes, she welcomes it. I don’t want to overwhelm her. Yes, I could give



her a lecture of two, three or five hours, no problem for me. But this is not what I'm supposed to do." The behavior towards the learning recipient is balanced, but the relationship with the mother is a good one and is characterized by mutual respect: "There must be humility. Because otherwise I'd just be policing her. And that's not appropriate" (surrogate grandmother Matylda). This means both generations have an equal position – the surrogate grandmother provides advice and the mother accepts it and perceives it as beneficial, implicitly accepting the grandmother's need to teach her. Behavior during learning is thus active and bi-directional: "She [the mother] knows everything. It's rather that we talk about what we are going to do. Because we're tuned ... the very same way" (surrogate grandmother Sofie). Both the surrogate grandmother and the mother are interested in learning and take part in it. Both generations put their experience and needs into the process of intergenerational learning.

The third type is the Strategist. Surrogate grandmothers of this type act in accordance with this statement: "When I want to teach something, I need a strategy." Thanks to their experience and abilities, surrogate grandmothers are able to sense the mother's need to learn. Surrogate grandmother Jitka describes it thus: "As I'm saying, I map the situation and say one or two sentences. That kind which would match it, match the situation we're in." Mothers do not ask for advice actively in this case. This is why the surrogate grandmother sneaks in her advice strategically but appropriately, so that the mother can take note of the information and take it in: "If I want to say something no matter what, I do say it. I formulate the sentence in a simple way, so that it contains what I was willing to say" (surrogate grandmother Jana). This means that the learning trigger is the mother's potential need to learn, which is sensed or noted by the surrogate grandmother. SG6, for instance, describes it in the following way: "Well, I guess when Z., the wildest one among the kids, the five-year-old. So when I take the children to the car and she begins to nurse the first one, the little one. So they're sitting in a car and she has the little one in her lap and Z. immediately starts crawling across the seats and... So then I for example see that she doesn't know what to do about him. So she kind of complains. She doesn't ask but she [the mother] may say 'That's awful.' So I offer her some advice. So it's not regular, I think it's happens in waves, when I can see she feels she doesn't know what to do." The behavior of both generations contains evidence of the surrogate grandmothers being domineering: this means the surrogate grandmother can sneak in a piece of advice although the mother has not asked for it. It thus tends to be the surrogate grandmother who directs intergenerational learning, and whose glosses and ability to sense the mother's needs gives direction to the whole process. This also means that the behavior during learning is one-directional.



### **Relationship as a factor determining the content of intergenerational learning**

The interviews conducted with the surrogate grandmothers allow us to identify two content levels of intergenerational learning between the surrogate grandmother and the mother, namely the basic instrumental level and the personal super-level above it. These content levels depend on the type of relationship between the surrogate grandmother and the mother in a crucial way. The relationship can be friend-like, or like a mother-daughter relationship, or a professional relationship, or an unfulfilled relationship. The friend-like relationship is typical of surrogate grandmothers who view the mother as a friend and speak of her in this way. This means that they act as a surrogate grandmother towards the child and as a friend towards the mother. This can be evidenced by what surrogate grandmother Jana said: "I am like a granny for the little boy, although he calls me Auntie, but I feel much more like a friend of hers." The relationship between the mother and the surrogate grandmother is based on a deeper bond between the two women. It is not necessary for this bond to be based on what they have experienced together. Some women are fine with a sense of belonging, as evidenced by the example of surrogate grandmother Jana: "So we are a kind of friends. We do not do so many things together, so this friendship is more like theoretical, practically there is not so much. But theoretically, yes." One could expect that a friendship would be prevented by the differing ages and generations but the opposite is true. What is much more important is mutual respect and openness. This is eloquently expressed by what surrogate grandmother Amálie said: "I don't know, it has never happened that we would be, as you say, discordant. We do tell each other difficult stuff that must be dealt with and we do deal with it. Neither of us gets offended... I don't know, we just arrive at a conclusion about something. There has not been a problem we could not deal with."

Besides this, the mother-daughter type of relationship is based on great emotional and social proximity. The unfulfilled need of both generations to have a family and to live the grandmother role plays an important role. This is evident in what surrogate grandmother Sofie said: "I have my own children, and I love them the way I do... It [the family where the woman performs the role of a surrogate grandmother] is a kind of extra. This is where I'm getting what I was missing. She [the mother] shows her love to me, I to her... A lovely relationship. Lovely." This means that both the mother and the surrogate grandmother play a role of a missing link in the family and it suits them both: "Because she doesn't have a mother. She died when she was thirteen. So it was tough for her. The relationship between us is, I'd say, nearly like one between a mother and a daughter" (SG2). In this relationship,

each generation plays its role and fulfills its task. The younger generation is learning from the older one and the older one is passing on experience and learning from the younger one.

The professional type of relationship is based mainly on the requirements and beliefs of the surrogate grandmother who avoids creating a strong emotional bond with the surrogate family. She has nevertheless a very good attitude towards the children and the whole family. Surrogate grandmother Matylda, for instance, says: "It's true that when one does this there's a great danger of getting emotionally involved... That's a big danger. Especially for me who loves children. When I was entering this organization, I thought 'Be careful, you're there but you must slow down a bit...' I'm a pro here in fact." The surrogate grandmothers explain their behavior by saying the family is not their own biological one, where the grandparents should spoil the grandchildren and envelop them in love. They see their task as something different. They are trying to teach the children a variety of skills that only they, as members of the oldest generation, can pass on to them.

The professional relationship also characterizes the surrogate grandmothers' attitude to the children: "Like I'm not the kind of grandmother who brings sweets to the kids... And as I was saying, I don't want them to love me because I keep bringing stuff – like the grandmother [in a novel by the classic Czech author Božena Němcová] who took nuts from her pockets, and the children loved her. That's not what I want. Because I think it's... it's not right" (surrogate grandmother Matylda). That the grandmother does not bring presents to the children and avoids a strong emotional bond does not mean that she is not enjoying the work or that it is not fulfilling for her. Even without a strong emotional bond, expectations of both generations can be met in the relationship.

The last type of relationship is an unfulfilled one, which is typical of grandmothers who would like to deepen their relationship with the mother or the whole surrogate family but encounter rejection from the surrogate family, especially the mother. Surrogate grandmother Lenka, for instance, reports: "There is always something she must do. And she did promise me a trip together, that we would go for a trip. I could go any time. She never has time. She's like, how to put it, a kind of robot, a product of this time... That's what I would like to do. I would like to go for a trip, by train for example, some place I know so that they could get to know the place as well." The risk of this kind of relationship is in the unfulfilled needs of the surrogate grandmother at the emotional level and a potential loss of motivation, which may even lead to her terminating the cooperation with the surrogate family. The above-described forms of relationship between the surrogate grandmother and the mother and the associated degrees of mutual sympathy, trust, and openness influence whether the contents of intergenerational learning are

limited to instrumental topics associated with childcare provision or whether this level is topped with a personal one. The fundamental instrumental level of contents may be traced in all the forms of relationship identified between the surrogate grandmothers and the mothers, i.e. friend-like, mother-daughter like, professional, and unfulfilled. The personal level occurs as an extension to the first two types of relationship.

The instrumental topics, as mentioned above, concern taking care of children and bringing them up, i.e. especially how children are brought up, what principles this upbringing is based on, what rules are to be followed, and what constitute the roles of a surrogate grandmother and mother. Instrumental topics also concern specific situations in taking care of children, whether this is how to deal with children getting hurt or their diet. Harmonizing the attitudes of mothers (or parents) and surrogate grandmothers is associated with mutual learning focused on social skills as well as specific manual skills. It can be said that the learning between the surrogate grandmother and the mother involves social learning, i.e. of values, principles, and morals, with lived experience playing an important role. One example of such learning is a situation in which the family that the surrogate grandmother is coming to is deeply religious (Roman Catholic) while the surrogate grandmother is an atheist brought up in a family adhering to Communist values. Both parties thus learn mutual tolerance. As surrogate grandmother Jitka says, “I told the family straight away when I was asked about this [whether she was religious], and I said *No*. They do not object... but the little one, she kept drawing a cross on my forehead and so on. So I asked the mother what I should do about it... and she suggested I might say that I loved her as well, that that was enough. I think they discussed that among themselves because it changed since then and the girls now understand [that I don't believe in God], even the youngest one.” Besides social learning, there is also sensory motor learning, i.e. learning specific manual skills needed in taking care of children.

Focusing on the personal super-level of the learning content, a significantly wider range of topics emerges. Learning contents include the objective of Trefoil, childcare provision, but they further encompass topics exclusive to the life situations of the surrogate grandmother and the mother, each of whom is sharing her own personal, work-related, or health issues. They learn from one another by sharing their experiences. The topics are frequently ones generally regarded as highly personal, and they are communicated about based on a shared sense of trust and safety, as some selections from the interviews show. Surrogate grandmother Anna, for instance, says: “So she shares her problems at work, the difficulties she is experiencing there. And other difficulties, how to deal with the kindergarten or school and similar.”

Surrogate grandmother Sofie reports: “Well, and then it’s family kind of issues. Who is experiencing what, like small troubles. We share all that.” Even at the personal level of learning, social learning prevails.

### **How surrogate grandmothers teach (and learn)**

This section discusses the methods that surrogate grandmothers use to teach and learn. Like other types of learning, intergenerational learning builds on interaction. In connection with this, all of the participants of the process must be considered, as well as their roles in it and their mutual, bi-directional interactions. Surrogate grandmothers are a learning source but frequently also recipients of learning, and the two processes cannot be separated from one another in terms of their operation. This is why the following learning methods concern both situations when the surrogate grandmother is teaching (the mother) and situations when the surrogate grandmother is learning (from the mother). The surrogate grandmothers particularly mentioned the act of observation in their interviews. As one of them (surrogate grandmother Anna) states, “I’m trying to take in every situation I find myself in alongside the mother. It is important to be good at observing things for that.” Observation includes empathy, which was also frequently mentioned, as another surrogate grandmother explains (surrogate grandmother Lenka): “I try to understand the situation from the mother’s perspective, I’m trying to learn something from the situation by empathizing with the mother, because I am aware that each generation may have attitudes of its own.” We may conclude that how these methods are used is in harmony with the above-described contents of intergenerational learning, which falls within social learning.

Another method used is imitation. The method builds directly on practical situations when the surrogate grandmother or mother are performing actions associated with childcare, such as cooking, changing the children’s clothes, etc. and the mother or surrogate grandmother adopts the ways in which these actions are performed by the other.

Finally, a third group of methods are associated mainly with verbal communication, namely explanations within dialogue. Surrogate grandmothers describe this method in terms of sharing: “We deal with it together... It’s more like we talk about what we are going to do. One knows about this, the other about that, and we put it together” (surrogate grandmother Sofie).

## Conclusion

The role of seniors in society is changing in response to the ongoing massive demographic change. With a certain degree of simplification, one could say that this role is shifting from a passive concept of a senior person as a recipient of aid to an active concept. Senior age is presently viewed as a period of life providing opportunities for self-realization and self-fulfillment. Even the role of seniors within the family, i.e. the grandparent role, is changing, and there are a number of alternative models. These include the expanding phenomenon of surrogate grandparenthood, i.e. grandparenthood based not on biological links within the family but on social links that the family and the surrogate grandparent enter into in a mediated way, based on needs articulated in different ways. On the part of surrogate grandparents, these usually include the need for social contact, especially with children or with grandchildren that they themselves do not have or are not in touch with for a variety of reasons. On the part of the family, the needs are primarily for childcare for their young children and for contact with the older generation.

In the research we describe, surrogate grandparenthood was explored in the context of intergenerational learning. Intergenerational learning is a process through which the individual generations transmit their knowledge and experience. This particular case concerned grandparent and parent generations, namely surrogate grandmothers and the biological mothers of children that these grandmothers were taking care of within the mediated Trefoil project. Interviews with the surrogate grandmothers showed that surrogate grandmothers were active agents in the process of intergenerational learning, constituting a learning source. Three types of surrogate grandmothers were identified, reflecting their attitude to intergenerational learning in the educator role: the Consultant, the Partner, and the Strategist. Although this finding was not among the objectives of our pilot study, it may be said that the proposed typology provides implicit evidence of the assumption concerning the variability in the ways of living the parent role, with the individual types differing in terms of approach to and performance of intergenerational learning as well as in terms of position within the family in which the surrogate grandparenthood takes place. The forms of interaction between the biological mother of the child and the surrogate grandmother influences interactions between the surrogate grandmother and the grandchild in a crucial way (cf. Pfeifer & Sussman, 1991).

We were able to define the contents of intergenerational learning on two levels – the basic instrumental level, with topics concerning childcare and upbringing, and a personal super-level, represented by personal, work-related, and health-related topics. It is evident that these two levels are shaped mainly

by the relationship between the surrogate grandmother and the mother. It is this very relationship that creates a scope for or a barrier to the individual topics. If the relationship is limited to the professional level (including cases when one of the parties would like to deepen the relationship but the other party refuses), the content of intergenerational learning is limited to instrumental topics, a kind of content basis restricted to meeting the objectives of Trefoil – childcare. If the relationship between the mother and the surrogate grandmother approximates attributes which can be observed in well-functioning biological families, the contents of intergenerational learning approximate what can be observed in biological families. Besides instrumental topics, the contents of intergenerational learning are extended to personal, work-related, and health-related ones, forming a personal super-level. This research thus indicates a potential parallel between biological and surrogate grandparenthood. A number of studies (e.g. Antonucci, 2007; Cherri, 2008) dealing with intergenerational learning in biological families focused on the positive dimensions of family life, indicating that within family intergenerational relations, activities are shared by relatives who are in contact and help one another. Both members of the parent generation and the grandparent generation speak of mutual provision and acceptance of help and support; these generations are also satisfied with the amount of contact they have. A longitudinal study by Bengtson (2005) confirms that if intergenerational relations remain stable in the long run and have a positive focus, they are highly beneficial to family members, not only at the level of mutual learning. Positive aspects of family life supporting intergenerational learning are discussed by Rabušicová, Kamanová, and Pevná (2011) as pro-learning family culture. This means that if family members communicate openly, if there is an atmosphere in the family characterized by mutual respect, if individual members feel happy within their family, perceive it as cohesive, and value the time they spend together, the situation constitutes good conditions for learning in the family. The situation is similar in surrogate families if the offer on the part of surrogate grandmothers meets the demand on the part of surrogate families and the grandparent role is lived on one side (the person ages actively) while the family finds the “missing” link in family life in the representative of the older generation. The firm bond created on this basis opens space for experiencing family life at its best. In this case, the estimate may be that even in these social relations, a pro-learning family culture, and consequently, the development of intergenerational learning may be expected. It is up to future research to identify further parallels between biologically and socially constituted family bonds and their influence on intergenerational learning. Demographic and cultural-social trends are bound to provide increasing scope for further development of alternative family forms and roles.

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