

The Grandparent-Grandchild Bond: A Bibliographical Review in the Psychoanalytic Approach

O Vínculo Avós-Netos: Uma Revisão Bibliográfica na Abordagem Psicanalítica

El Vínculo Abuelos-Nietos: Una Revisión Bibliográfica desde el Enfoque Psicoanalítico

Le Lien Grands-Parents/Petits-Enfants : Une Revue Bibliographique Selon l'Approche Psychanalytique

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Abstract

Life expectancy and the older adult population have risen across the Western world in recent decades. Alongside other factors, this shift has elevated the importance of grandparents' roles within families. Yet studies that directly examine the dynamics of the grandparent–grandchild dyad remain scarce, especially within a psychoanalytic framework that has traditionally prioritized parent–child relationships. This article seeks to deepen understanding of this topic and to extend psychoanalytic concepts beyond Freud's legacy. We conducted a literature review in major digital databases using specific descriptors, and we included books by recognized authors in the field from the origins of psychoanalysis to the present. The review suggests that, while intrapsychic psychoanalysis emphasizes the role grandparents play in their grandchildren's working through of the Oedipus complex, the psychoanalysis of the link focuses on grandparents as containers and transmitters of familial psychic contents — thereby facilitating or disrupting psychic inheritance.

Keywords: grandparents, grandchildren, psychoanalysis, links psychoanalysis.

Resumo

O aumento da expectativa de vida e da população idosa vêm crescendo no mundo ocidental desde as últimas décadas. Somado a outros fatores, isso levou a um ganho de importância do papel dos avós na família. Ainda assim, são escassos os estudos que tratam diretamente da dinâmica envolvida na dupla avós-netos, considerando-se o referencial psicanalítico que sempre primou pela relação entre pais e filhos. A relevância deste artigo consiste em aprofundar a compreensão dessa temática associada ao próprio desenvolvimento e à ampliação dos conceitos psicanalíticos, após o legado de Freud. Para tanto, foi realizada uma pesquisa bibliográfica nas principais bases de dados digitais, de acordo com descritores específicos, incluindo livros de autores reconhecidos na área, desde a origem da psicanálise até o momento atual. Depreendeu-se que, enquanto a psicanálise intrapsíquica dá enfoque à importância que os avós têm na elaboração do complexo edípico de seus netos, a psicanálise vincular se ocupa mais da função dos avós como continentes e transmissores dos conteúdos psíquicos familiares e consequentes facilitadores ou disruptores da herança psíquica.

Palavras-chave: avós, netos, psicanálise, psicanálise vincular.

Resumen

El aumento de la esperanza de vida y de la población anciana ha venido creciendo en el mundo occidental desde las últimas décadas. Sumado a otros factores, ello ha conllevado un incremento en la relevancia del papel de los abuelos dentro de la familia. No obstante, son escasos los estudios que abordan de manera directa la dinámica implicada en la diada abuelos-nietos, considerando el marco psicoanalítico que históricamente ha privilegiado la relación entre padres e hijos. La relevancia del presente artículo radica en profundizar la comprensión de esta temática asociada al propio desarrollo y a la ampliación de los conceptos psicoanalíticos, tras el legado de Freud. Para ello, se realizó una investigación bibliográfica en las principales bases de datos digitales, siguiendo descriptores específicos, e incluyendo obras de autores reconocidos en el área, desde los orígenes del psicoanálisis hasta la actualidad. Se dedujo que, mientras el psicoanálisis intrapsíquico enfatiza la importancia de los abuelos en la elaboración del complejo de Edipo de sus nietos, el psicoanálisis vincular se ocupa principalmente de la función de los abuelos como continentes y transmisores de contenidos psíquicos familiares, actuando consecuentemente como facilitadores o disruptores de la herencia psíquica.

Palabras clave: abuelos, nietos, psicoanálisis, psicoanálisis vincular.

Résumé

L'espérance de vie et la population âgée sont en augmentation dans le monde occidental depuis les dernières décennies. Combiné à d'autres facteurs, cela a conduit à une augmentation de l'importance du rôle des grands-parents au sein de la famille. Malgré cela, les études qui abordent directement la dynamique impliquée dans la relation grands-parents/petits-enfants sont rares, surtout en tenant compte du cadre psychanalytique qui a toujours privilégié la relation entre parents et enfants. L'importance de cet article réside dans l'approfondissement de la compréhension de cette thématique associée au propre développement et à l'élargissement des concepts psychanalytiques, après l'apport de Freud. À cette fin, une recherche bibliographique a été menée dans les principales bases de données numériques, selon des descripteurs spécifiques, y compris des livres d'auteurs reconnus dans le domaine, depuis l'origine de la psychanalyse jusqu'au moment actuel. Il a été déduit que, tandis que la psychanalyse intrapsychique met l'accent sur l'importance des grands-parents dans l'élaboration du complexe œdipien de leurs petits-enfants, la psychanalyse du lien s'occupe davantage de la fonction des grands-parents en tant que contenant et transmetteurs des contenus psychiques familiaux et, par conséquent, facilitateurs ou perturbateurs de l'héritage psychique.

Mots-clés : grands-parents, petits-enfants, psychanalyse, psychanalyse du lien.

On Grandparents and Grandchildren in Psychoanalysis

Situating the grandparent–grandchild relationship within psychoanalysis is challenging, given that the field — since Freud — has focused primarily on the dynamics between the two most immediate generations, namely parents and children, a focus initially condensed in the concept of the Oedipus complex. Over time, the mother–infant relationship gained centrality as the primary, foundational matrix of the human psyche. Against this backdrop, specific works on grandparents and grandchildren began to appear across the decades, at times sporadically.

With increasing longevity in the Western world and ongoing shifts in family life, the older adult population has assumed a new place and, in turn, has become the focus of studies in the human and health sciences. Accordingly, this article proposes a literature review on grandparents and grandchildren within psychoanalysis, guided by the field's own development and expansion after Freud's legacy. In other words, an initial emphasis on the intrapsychic dimension is complemented by an intersubjective perspective on the human subject. Because this topic remains relatively understudied, we sought to outline several reflections arising from the survey conducted.

We performed a bibliographic search in major digital databases — SciELO, Redalyc, and Google Scholar — using the Boolean descriptors (“avós” OR “netos”) AND (“psicanálise” OR “psicanálise vincular”) in order to capture the largest possible number of articles. The time frame ran from the emergence of psychoanalysis with Freud through 2024, restricted to Portuguese-language publications. Works in other languages were not included due to feasibility and the study's focus.

Inclusion criteria were (a) works focused on the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren or on the role of grandparents, situated within the theoretical field of psychoanalysis or psychoanalysis of the link; and (b) relevant publications that addressed the topic directly and grounded their discussion in psychoanalytic theory. Studies that merely mentioned grandparents and grandchildren, without a specific approach to the topic and/or these theoretical frameworks, were excluded from the review, even when situated within psychology. Some of the older references — especially by major psychoanalytic authors and in books — were accessed through citations in digital materials, which broadened the theoretical scope of the review and recovered historically relevant contributions.

Data collection occurred intensively from March 2016 to December 2018 — driven by the academic demands of the master's research that led to this study — and then continuously through December 2024 to keep the work current. All materials were read in full. The analyses sought to identify trends, theoretical gaps, and specific contributions concerning the grandparent–grandchild bond within the psychic field of the dyad. Given the breadth of the search, we extracted only the key concept(s) from each work analyzed. The principal themes that emerged concerned the role and function of grandparents in the family as a whole or in direct relation to grandchildren, and the psychic implications of that function for grandchildren, whether protective or pathological.

The review yielded 24 analyzed works, comprising articles, book chapters, and theses. Of these, 11 were Brazilian and 13 by foreign authors. An additional 38 references were used for contextualization and theoretical grounding, though they did not directly address the grandparent–grandchild bond. The materials span foundational psychoanalytic texts — such as those by Freud, Ferenczi, and Winnicott — through more recent studies published after 2014 that consider cultural and technological changes in grandparent–grandchild relations. A higher concentration of works appears from the 1990s onward, reflecting the expansion of psychoanalysis of the link and growing attention to intergenerational dynamics.

One limitation of this study is the restriction to Portuguese-language works, which may reflect biases related to Brazilian realities and interpretations. Another is the reliance on three scientific databases, given the study's feasibility constraints.

The earliest texts we found date to 1913 and include Ferenczi (1913/1992), Abraham (1913/1961), and Jones (1913/1938). After that, there is a gap in publications on this topic until the 1940s, when occasional studies reappear, typically separated by roughly a decade. The most recent articles located were Naffah (2011) and Redondaro et al. (2022), which were the only Brazilian studies identified within this theoretical lens in the databases consulted. This pattern may suggest that interest in the topic is cyclical, perhaps reflecting shifts in how the family and its relational dynamics are conceived, as well as the concomitant broadening of psychoanalytic concepts in Portuguese.

Although Freud did not address grandparents and grandchildren as a specific topic, certain passages in his work hint at the early contours of this dyad—defined by the fact that two generations are mediated by an intermediate one. In the case of Little Hans (Freud, 1909/2006a), for example, Freud explores the boy's solution to his Oedipus complex when he proposes remaining with his mother while his father might be with his own mother, implicitly signaling the importance of grandparents as a possible avenue for resolving a central parent–child conflict. Later, Freud discusses the girl's infantile wish to have a child with her father—who would, in theory, be both his child and grandchild—as compensation for castration (Freud, 1924/2006d).

In early writings by Karl Abraham (1913/1961), Ernest Jones (1913/1938), and Ferenczi (1913/1992), we see particular emphasis on relationships between grandfathers and paternal grandchildren, reflecting the patriarchal family model of the time. In general, these authors conceived of the grandfather as an aged paternal figure whom the grandchild might use in different ways to work through the Oedipal conflict. They also highlighted the grandfather's ambivalence: he could be viewed either as an omnipotent, respected elder or as a frail old man nearing death.

Jones (1913/1938) foregrounds the fantasy of “inversion of generations,” in which the child believes that as they grow, the opposite happens to parents and older people, who would “shrink.” The film *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (Fincher, 2012) — whose protagonist is born old and becomes an adult, a child, and then an infant before dying — serves as a vivid allegory for this fantasy. Imagining himself trading places with his grandfather, the grandchild could also invert the Oedipal situation, placing himself in a position of control over his father (Jones, 1913/1938).

Karl Abraham (1913/1961) observed that some patients' intense bonds with grandparents were proportional to their conflicts with parental figures. In certain children's fantasies, they appeared as princes, with parents as kings and grandparents occupying a divine station — an image aligned with the figure of the elderly sage.

On the other hand, grandparents could also be seen as fragile, weakened by time and illness, and close to death, as noted by Ferenczi (1913/1992). They would be “defeated parents,” eliciting repudiation from grandchildren and generating ambivalent feelings toward grandparents, oscillating between strength and weakness. Abraham (1913/1961) reports the case of a patient whose hope lay in the idea that his grandfather's frailty foretold the father's future weakness and defeat, at which point he himself could reign. Ferenczi (1913/1992) also posits that the grandfather could become the target of a grandchild's aggressive fantasies originally directed at the father, through displacement.

More recently, Marques (2012), in research with adolescents and older adults, noted that a parent's presence tends to evoke the child's infantile aspects—even in adulthood. The grandchild may thus witness a mitigation of parental authority, as parents appear childlike in the presence of the grandparents' authority. This can foster a strong alliance between grandparents and grandchildren, with the second generation (the parents) receiving conflicts from both sides. If the Oedipus complex implies a triangle of father, mother, and child, the inclusion of grandparents suggests a widened configuration involving grandparents, parents, and grandchildren.

Looking further back, Deutsch (1945) portrays the grandmother in a Manichean key: she could be a “fairy” or a “witch” to her grandchildren, depending on her life history and ability to navigate aging. In Deutsch's view, the “good”

grandmother would also have been a “good” mother, facilitating her daughter’s relationship with her own children and passing on a positive, gratifying image to her grandchildren.

Rapaport (1958) held that identification with the grandfather stems from pre-Oedipal phases of development and can temper identification and introjection vis-à-vis the parents. More specifically, this bond relativizes parental power, positioning parents more as older siblings. In this way, they become objects more easily assimilated to the child’s rivalry, helping to drain destructive fantasies toward the parents.

Along similar lines, Kohut (1971) proposed that grandparents function as “selfobjects,” supporting the grandchild’s narcissistic investment. This enables the child to express fantasies of omnipotence, fusion, or idealization of the self that might otherwise be intolerable to the parents.

Building on these theories, Battistelle and Farneti (1991) conducted a quantitative study of the grandparent–grandchild relationship and concluded that it evolves through phases aligned with the grandchild’s emotional and cognitive development. Up to age 5, grandparents may function as alternatives to parents, nearly on equal footing, being more pleasant, symbiotic, and manageable — thereby meeting the phase-specific needs for omnipotence and egocentrism. With entry into school and contact beyond the family circle, grandparents lose salience as the child invests more in the extrafamilial world. During puberty, which involves rejecting adult values, grandparents — as representatives of that adult world — may be more easily dismissed than parents without fear of punishment. In young adulthood, grandparents regain importance: as visibly older and weaker figures, they can offer a secure affective base without intrusive or competitive meanings.

Dolto also addressed grandparents in a 1998 book, particularly the grandfather’s failure to substitute for the paternal function when women separate from their husbands and move back in with their parents. As in the Oedipal triangle, the boy identifies with the element in the father that attracts the mother — his virility. He cannot identify with the grandfather’s virility, because it is not what attracts his mother. The result, Dolto argues, is a failure in the boy’s socialization and the emergence of disturbances.

In the more recent Brazilian context, Naffah (2011), drawing on Winnicott’s (1990; 1992) determinist views of the masculine and feminine, proposes that, given the importance of primary maternal preoccupation and women’s entrance into the labor market, fathers and grandmothers increasingly assume maternal functions alongside the mother. In this scenario, the grandfather is least likely to be captured by that logic and thus remains somewhat marginal. Precisely for this reason, he may be better positioned to perceive his grandchild’s needs from a distinct vantage point compared with other caregivers. In this perspective, he would take on the traditionally paternal function of marking differences. For Naffah (2011), just as there can be no equivalence between father and mother, neither can grandfather and grandmother have interchangeable functions. That said, there is a growing trend of grandfathers abandoning traditionally masculine roles to provide more maternal care to grandchildren (Dias, 2015), a shift that, according to the author, correlates with the weakening of male authority.

In a systematic review on grandparents’ influence on child development, Redondaro et al. (2022) emphasize that grandparents can contribute positively — for example, by facilitating intergenerational respect — or negatively, by fostering role inversion and confusion vis-à-vis the child’s parents.

From the intrapsychic perspective, the works surveyed build upon one another across the decades and interconnect around a central theme: the role of grandparents in the working through of the Oedipus complex. Despite the value of these contributions, the overall production remains limited — especially in Brazil — and we recognize that understanding this kind of bond may be broadened by another psychoanalytic lens: psychoanalysis of the link, or bond configurations.

The Grandparent–Grandchild Bond in Light of Psychoanalysis of the Link and Vincular Configurations

Psychoanalysis of the link (Berenstein, 2011) and the theory of bond configurations (Kaës, 1993; 2001; 2014) share a central assertion: the psychic constitution of every subject is essentially tied to generational legacy. In this framework, grandparents — whether actively present or not — are pivotal. They serve as the connective thread between their own forebears (parents and grandparents, possibly deceased) and their successors (children and grandchildren, theoretically living), thereby chaining together five generations (Barros, 1987). The subject thus emerges within a family and generational chain that confers existential belonging and makes all members both heirs to and transmitters of a particular history, charged with conscious and unconscious contents.

It is through the phenomenon of generational psychic transmission — studied since antiquity (Granjon, 2001) — that we understand the articulations between the subject and his or her subjective prehistory. Because this article focuses on possible exchanges of psychic contents across generations at the intersection of grandparent–grandchild bonds, we address this key concept in general terms as systematized by Kaës (1998; 2001; 2005; 2014) into 2 categories: transgenerational transmission, in which unconscious contents are passed on without transformation; and intergenerational transmission, in which those contents are worked through and transformed.

In the Argentine lineage of psychoanalysis of the bond, the notion of bond breaks with the simpler idea of the object relation — limited to representation of the object — and expands it to include both representation *and* presentation of the other, since it implies presence (Berenstein, 2011; Puget, 2015). The bond functions as a third element joining two or more parties (Kaës, 1993), whose intersection consists of shared points of identification (Berenstein, 2011).

Within the family, the link marks the existence of the bond between members and positions them relative to one another by degrees of kinship — mother, child, uncle, cousin, grandfather, grandmother, and so on. Consequently, the grandparent–grandchild link is already determined by genealogy, regardless of whether a relationship exists or of its quality (Benghozi & Féres-Carneiro, 2001).

“Family” is also a central concept in psychoanalysis of the link, which attends to the group’s psychic dimension and its dynamics (Correa, 2002). The family appears as an organized group that orders certain factors — law, language, values, ideals — while prohibiting others, such as incest and murder, thereby warding off chaos, madness, and disintegration (Carreteiro, 2001).

The family is a group with special features; at its core it founds a psychic space where generational exchanges occur and where a kind of reservoir holds the fantasies and phantoms specific to that family (Correa, 2002). Granjon (2001) calls the group psychic apparatus — or family psychic apparatus — a virtual device that processes the group’s shared contents and delimits a containing envelope.

When a child is born into this family group, generations come into confrontation, allowing past experiences to return for the parents — now grandparents — who revisit the births of their own children. Grandparents strive to adapt to their new role, offering responses linked to their ancestors. What emerges is a movement that re-actualizes a past of experiences in the face of the new (Vianna, 2006).

The child becomes the receptacle of parental desires and projections, embodying the hope of fulfilling a promise (Freud, 1914/2006c). The baby’s birth repositions kinship roles, and family functions must be readjusted. Grandparents, until then “only” parents, must contain the impulse to instill their own expectations in the grandchild and leave that task to their children.

Unlike the parent–child bond, the grandparent–grandchild bond is not necessarily marked by the grandparents’ desire; and even when such desire exists, there is no direct control over becoming a grandparent — one becomes a grandparent involuntarily. That desire can be exercised only indirectly, through influence over one’s children. Can we then speak of a specifically grandparental narcissism? If so, to what extent might it impinge on the grandchild? Regardless of the grandparents’ desire, parents sometimes regard the child as a kind of gift offered to the grandparents in return for the gift of life they themselves received (Portugal, 2007). In this sense, the grandchild may materialize the parents’ wish to gratify their own parents.

Every family has its own family myth at the core of its structure. This myth — and the transgenerational representations associated with it — can be structuring for the family, though it may also be destabilizing (Eiguer, 1995). Ruptures may occur at different levels in relation to the idealized family: for example, the ideal of the nuclear family may conflict with the extended family’s ideal, which includes grandparents, uncles, and cousins; or with that of the ancestors. Grandparents — preferably those no longer living — would sustain this family myth and embody the living bond between the family’s past, anchored in the ancestors, and its successors, who carry on the process of transmission (Eiguer, 1995).

If Freud (1924/2006d) pointed to children’s identifications with their progenitors, subsequent authors also consider identifications with an ancestral figure prior to the parents, such as grandparents. This is evident not only in the repetition of pathology but also in healthy situations in which one sees mimicry of such predecessors. A grandchild may thus carry and personify the imago of a grandparent or ancestor (Eiguer, 1995).

For Berenstein (2011), the family creates an enveloping boundary that distinguishes who is inside from who is outside. This boundary aligns with blood ties, marking those who enter from outside (sons-/daughters-in-law) as strangers. Even though in-laws are closer generationally, the grandparent–grandchild bond may initially be stronger because it carries the assurance of biological linearity.

Following Berenstein (2011), becoming a grandparent entails processing a series of renunciations: relinquishing the parental relationship with one’s children — who are now parents — which implies giving up what remained of infantile sexuality toward them; relinquishing the position of primary arbiters of family values, myths, prohibitions, and precepts; and accepting a relative exclusion from the new family one’s son or daughter has formed. Put differently, grandparents become the “thirds excluded” relative to the parent–child bond.

Regarding the contents transmitted between grandparents and grandchildren, grandparents act as dual agents of transmission. Their experiences — together with those of their ancestors and their children — shape a genealogical lineage that culminates in the grandchild; and they also participate actively through direct contact with the child, much like parents or other caregivers. We might therefore think of a transmission of the past and a transmission of the present, respectively. Perhaps a third mode is also conceivable: when grandparents, as the parents of the grandchild’s parents, recount stories about their children to their grandchildren.

It is also worth reflecting on grandparents who serve as primary caregivers, and on how transmission occurs when the child is deprived of the intermediate generation. Does the child receive the same inheritance the parents did — as if they were siblings? Or is the material different, now modified by time and/or by a reconfiguration of kinship positions?

Although pathology is not the focus of this review, it is relevant to outline this portion of the theory because it concentrates key contributions concerning grandparents and grandchildren within the present framework. It is equally important, however, to consider grandparent–grandchild bonds outside a pathological register, grounding the discussion in everyday, healthy dynamics.

Generational pathology is identified when historical elements of the ill subject's life are insufficient to explain the condition, and its etiology must instead be sought in the experiences of predecessors. These experiences infiltrate the subject's psyche, though they do not properly “belong” to him or her, as a foreign body (Prado & Giovannini, 2001). Pathology is thus an expression of intergenerational interaction and occurs only in contact with the other.

According to Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (1995), when a traumatic content cannot be borne, a lacuna forms in its place. The content becomes encapsulated and isolated from the rest of psychic life. Because it is not worked through, it is passed to subsequent generations, who may or may not transform it; failing that, heirs become hostages to it.

Eiguer (1995) classifies families as Oedipal, anaclitic-depressive, or narcissistic; the last is most prone to confusion between generations and sexes. Roles are frequently exchanged and self–other boundaries are unclear; a child may occupy the place of a parent — or even of a grandparent. In Oedipal families, there is acknowledgment of origins without loss of nuclear cohesion. In anaclitic and, in some cases, narcissistic families, ancestral figures such as grandparents occupy imposing, authoritative positions that extend into libidinal object ties, undermining the nuclear family's cohesion (Eiguer, 1995). By contrast, in the Oedipal family, boundaries are well drawn, including those separating grandparents, on one side, from children and grandchildren, on the other — who constitute a new family.

Some families live under the shadow of an imagistic figure of a deceased ancestor whose influence persists despite absence, producing a sense of debt or obligation toward that figure — or even a persistent idea of a mission to be accomplished (Eiguer, 1995). Grandparents may be the closest living bonds to that ancestral figure or, in some cases, may themselves embody it.

If there is a neurotic debt of children toward parents (Freud, 1913/2006b), such cases suggest a debt so great that it extends to grandparents and even further back to the ancestors. Descendants then experience guilt and ambivalence (Eiguer, 1995).

In other forms of transgenerational pathology — what Eiguer (1995) calls “empty representations” — a parent, captive to representations of the past, of his or her own parents or ancestors, fails to provide the narcissistic investment the child needs for a satisfactory subjective constitution. The child identifies with emptiness. Ancestors effectively monopolize the family story and usurp one or both parents' libidinal investment, leading to a breakdown of bonds across the lineage and even to psychosis in the child (Eiguer, 1995). The expected direction of libidinal investment is inverted: from successor to predecessor. Children invest in parents, grandchildren in grandparents, great-grandchildren in great-grandparents, and so forth. The grandparent–grandchild bond is compromised as grandparents draw from their children the investment that should be directed to their grandchildren.

These ideas in Eiguer (1995) resonate with Faimberg's (2001) “telescoping of generations,” whereby different stories are agglutinated across three generations, alienating the subject from his or her own internal contents because of an intrusive other. The child introjects parental intrapsychic conflicts precisely as received, without elaboration, and ends up reliving the parents' lives. Intrusion and appropriation blur self–other boundaries, thwarting differentiation. Without elaboration, the subject has no space to create a personal subjectivity and may face a kind of psychic death.

Schwartzman (1998), drawing on Missenard et al.'s (1989) concept of alienating identification, states that out of narcissistic fidelity to the preceding generation, parents often seek to identify their successors — their children — with the children's grandparents. In other words, children may be steered toward identifications that mirror their parents' identifications with their own parents. This is seen, for instance, when parents give children the same first name as the grandparents.

Addressing the relic bond, Prado and Giovannini (2001) discuss the relic-object, which lacks practical utility but functions as a private cult object, shoring up a belief in indestructibility despite time and change. Through omnipotent thought, it alters perception of reality and aims to soothe the pain of death, separation, and rupture.

This invites reflection on grandchildren who have lost their grandparents and who, through an inherited relic-object, can preserve something of that bond. An inherited object bears the connotation of making the donor's imprint both memorable and present — “updated” — not only for the receiving generation but also across time, since it can be passed down successively. The relic-object thus materializes intergenerational inheritance and the hope of the family's perpetuation.

Discussing psychic transmission necessarily involves differences between generations and the succession of temporalities. For Granjon (2001), however, past or prehistory is virtually synonymous with the present, because in the unconscious all three temporalities intermix and are better condensed into a “composite present.”

Drawing on Augustine's conception of time, Granjon (2001) parallels past with memory, present with perception,

and future with expectation. The older person evokes the past and thus memory, which, according to Puget (2001), has an important elaborative and creative function. Forgetting, far from being a failure, is part of the mnemonic process. Mechanisms of remembering and forgetting are present in every family (Puget, 2001). The sum of inscriptions of memory and forgetting produces a history — specifically, the family history.

In this sense, grandparents in the family would preserve its history, serving as a reservoir for what is to be perpetuated and for what is to be forgotten. What grandparents remember concerns the family group, but so too does what they forget, which may set a model for forgetting or denial within the group. If the family, functioning as a single apparatus, must perform linking and transformational work to metabolize circulating contents (Correa, 2002), then grandparents likely play an important metabolizing role as the living matrix of transmission.

Following this line of thought, Mijolla (2001) discusses how grandparents hold an important place in the family's psychic core through their accounts of ancestors, and how the psychoanalyst should listen for these contents to facilitate the individual's reconstruction of a preconscious prehistory.

Additional contributions between 2014 and 2023 were also identified. Silva (2014), Silva and Correa (2014), and Moura and Assis (2018) connect grandparents and grandchildren to children's literature and fairy tales in psychoanalysis, addressing transgenerationality from an intrapsychic vantage while straddling both theoretical strands. Broadly, these works suggest that grandparents — especially grandmothers (Moura & Assis, 2018) — play a key role in familial transmission of symbolic elements by telling stories to their grandchildren (Silva, 2014; Silva & Correa, 2014; Moura & Assis, 2018).

In a case study — where grandparents assumed primary parental functions for two granddaughters aged six and seven, while the mother and stepfather provided secondary care — Almeida and Okamoto (2018) found that resuming a parental role gave the grandparents a new sense of purpose, while the granddaughters developed a sense of responsibility toward the grandmother as principal caregiver, a dynamic that sustained the bond between them. The authors also concluded that, although grandparents played fundamental roles in psychic inheritance, certain generational factors had a direct impact on the family's Oedipal experience as a whole (Almeida & Okamoto, 2021).

In another case report on a grandfather–granddaughter dyad, Daró and Gomes (2022) discuss a “grandfather–mother–granddaughter” Oedipal triangulation — a three-generation Oedipus complex — linking three generations rather than two. They also analyze how the grandfather and granddaughter appeared to ally against the intermediate generation (the mother), even as elements of the “traditional” Oedipus complex seemed to recur in the dynamics, such as rivalry (granddaughter versus mother) and dual affection (between granddaughter and grandfather).

Daró's (2018) dissertation — based on four cases — examined how social media influence the grandparent–grandchild bond from the standpoint of psychoanalysis of the link, while also considering contemporary psychological and demographic contexts. Media channels can affect the dyad's bond in various ways, but they do not determine its quality or interfere with psychic transmission; rather, they tend to reflect the type of bond already established.

Santos (2023) highlights that grandparents who assume parental roles in adverse contexts, such as parental loss, must work through mourning while investing in the grandchildren's care. This role offers a sense of continuity and hope in the face of finitude. At the same time, contemporary realities pose inter- and transgenerational challenges, underscoring the complexity of new forms of parenthood and multiple family configurations (Santos, 2023).

Drawing on Winnicottian psychoanalysis, Buber's philosophical anthropology, and Walter Benjamin, Castro (2023) underscores — based on a qualitative study with ten grandparents — the importance of loving encounters with grandchildren, from which a “childlike force” emerges and opens new possibilities for life. The child's capacity to play and create becomes a powerful resource for grandparents.

Taken together, these reflections on the transmission of psychic life highlight a crucial point: when a content cannot be transmitted consciously, it will be transmitted unconsciously. In this sense, grandparents in a family fulfill a healthy function when they bring into consciousness stories that children and grandchildren need to appropriate as their own — so those stories can positively shape their life trajectories. Otherwise, when the inheritance is transmitted unconsciously, it may fail to be appropriated, and the subject becomes subjected to a largely unknown destiny, one that often manifests through repetition.

Final Considerations

Based on this review, the study of the grandparent–grandchild bond in psychoanalysis effectively begins with the works of Karl Abraham, Jones, and Ferenczi in 1913. Beyond the scarcity of development within intrapsychic psychoanalysis, there are notable gaps across decades — for example, the hiatus of more than 30 years between those early manuscripts and the next text found, Deutsch (1945), and the 20-year gap between Kohut (1971) and Battistelle and Farneti (1991) — at least according to the sources located here. In parallel, interest in psychoanalysis of the bond appears to take shape beginning in the 1990s, when the first relevant articles were identified, especially in Portuguese.

From the intrapsychic perspective — tracing back to Freud — the understanding of grandparents and grandchildren has centered on working through the Oedipus complex and on identification, with greater emphasis on the paternal line

and on grandfathers as effective substitutes for fathers. There is only one explicit reference to a specifically grandmaternal role, linked to mothers' relationships with their own mothers (Deutsch, 1945). This pattern can be read as the imprint of the traditional patriarchal family model on Freud's writings and those of his closest followers.

As psychoanalytic references expanded, the concept of the bond gained centrality over object relations; the family emerged as a locus that can promote both health and pathology; and the concept of generational psychic transmission became one of the pillars of the subject's psychic constitution. Even so, although this approach seems better suited to address the grandparent–grandchild bond, there are still few studies dedicated specifically to the topic. Most contributions focus on generational and vincular pathology, largely anchored in transgenerational psychic transmission.

Many contributions — particularly within psychoanalysis of the bond — place more weight on grandparents than on grandchildren. This likely reflects the centrality of psychic transmission in this approach, which, in principle, flows upward-to-downward (from elders to descendants), as if grandparents exerted greater influence on grandchildren than the reverse. Castro (2023), however, pushes back against this one-way view by emphasizing the playful potency of children for their grandparents.

Overall, the findings suggest that while traditional psychoanalysis stresses grandparents' importance in their grandchildren's working through of the Oedipus complex, psychoanalysis of the bond focuses more on grandparents as containers and transmitters of familial psychic contents — thus facilitating or disrupting psychic inheritance.

The theories presented here reveal both the richness of this field of research and practice and how much remains to be explored — especially when we move beyond the traditional heteronormative model to consider diverse relational and family configurations. Examples include grandparents who form a same-sex couple; grandparents of a grandchild raised by a same-sex couple; or grandparents of grandchildren born through assisted reproduction.

Another contemporary issue is the growing dissolution of hierarchies and the resulting inversion of the traditional “elder-sage/young-apprentice” logic, and how this affects psychic transmission. On this point, Puget (2015) notes that parents and grandparents, hoping to transmit their view of life to children and grandchildren, forget to listen — and then confront the fact that, today, the younger generations often know more than they do, and what they know does not come from the family. This theme may intersect with what Kaës (2001) calls the current crisis of psychic transmission — whether a negative crisis or simply a transformation.

In conclusion, this article not only gathers, reviews, and analyzes contributions across historical chronology, but also advances interpretive elements grounded in a newer metapsychology — psychoanalysis of the bond (Gomes, 2016) — which emphasizes generational psychic transmission and its implications for the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren. It addresses the importance of this bond within the family from a healthy, creative perspective, given the established clinical field focused on family and couple psychoanalysis. It also underscores the need for further studies—including Brazilian research—that deepen our understanding of this bond, taking into account increased longevity worldwide and changing family forms today.

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