

GRANDPARENTS AND GRANDCHILDREN

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Much in this paper will be either speculative or will attempt to connect what is known about other stages and aspects of psychological development to the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren. This is because very little has been written about it and very little empirical research has tested some of the assumptions commonly made about this relationship.

One useful account is that of the Rapoport¹ who devote a whole chapter to 'Parenting with adult children and grandparenting'. They review literature from the USA and this country and raise some valuable points, to which I shall refer later. It is interesting, however, to note that this literature review contains several comments such as:

'the point at which children become legally and socially independent of their parents marks the beginning of a twilight area in the family social science literature.' (p. 328)

'Another imbalance in the literature on parents with adult children is that, while grandmothering is sometimes considered, being viewed as the continuation of the role of mother - grandfathers, the fathers, get almost no attention. We know little about the felt needs of grandfathers, let alone grandmothers, who may feel pulled between their desires to become involved ... in non-parental roles but who feel obliged to help out with their children's families. The conventional assumption is that grandmothers need to continue to feel needed. There is little empirical work to support this.'

Of course, some elaborate research comes up with blindingly obvious answers. The conventional answer to the criticism is to say that in the course of testing assumptions - say, about 'what elderly people want' - even to find that one widely held assumption does not hold true in the face of examination is in itself useful. In matters pertaining to family life, we are particularly prone to make assumptions as to what happens, or should happen, and to describe them as 'common sense'. Unfortunately one man's common sense is another man's non-sense. There appears to be a particularly strong case for more research into the role of grandparents for a number of reasons, mainly concerned with

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certain known demographic trends and with known changes in the patterns of modern family life; both of which I shall develop in this paper. Before doing so, however, it is worth noting that the Rapoport's refer to no research on how grandchildren view their grandparents. A recent BBC programme - 'Grannies shouldn't wear T shirts' - gives an excellent account of children reflecting on their grandparents' strengths and weaknesses and, most important, the part they played in their lives. One cannot capture in writing the vividness of the children's voices but I shall use some of the children's observations to throw light on that unexplored side of the question - the children's views and felt needs.

One must begin with the predictable, almost mandatory observation in writing about ageing, by pointing out that grandparenthood is a status covering anything up to fifty years of life. (And that does not allow for the odd old lady who survives/^{to receive} her telegram from the Queen). Certainly many may expect to occupy this role for forty years. So it is pointless to discuss the role as if there were an inherent similarity in those who are thus described.

We can perhaps usefully divide the phase into three; first, there is for some a stage in which grandparenthood is combined with ongoing parental roles at home; "our eldest is off our hands now but our Bob is just taking 'O' levels". At such a time, the grandfather is very likely still to be employed and, increasingly, the probability is that grandmother will be in full or part time work. The average age of 'first grandparenting' has, in fact, been falling; women become grandparents around 49 - 51 and men between 51 and 53. Thus for many the advent of the first grandchild coincides with a period of intense family and economic activity. This paper will not explore that phase in any depth since our concern is with an older generation of grandparents.

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of the grandfather and perhaps also the grandmother.

This is, of course, the time when plans are made by fit, healthy, late middle aged people for the next period of, say fifteen years, when they can look forward to relative autonomy but, in making their plans, frequently want to take into account their wish to observe or participate in their grandchildren's development. The rapidity of this development between birth and 'going to school' and, indeed, even after that, means that actual frequency of contact is more significant than it might be in relationships with adult children. The disappointment at 'missing out' in those stages, both in the sheer pleasure of watching but also in the growth of relationship, at different stages, is often strong and it is realistic. Something is missed which cannot be made up.

This is also the time when, characteristically, grandparents are thought of as being available to help their children in a variety of ways, including family support for grandchildren. We have some recent evidence relating to this subject from, for example, the OPCS survey² concerning the frequency of contact between the over 60's and their children. But the influential work of Willmott and Young³ in the 1960's in which patterns of kinship and grandparental roles were explored is in urgent need of updating and replication to get a clearer picture of what is happening in Britain as we enter the 1980's. Statistical analysis of 'contact with relatives' is not enough. What requires examination, between regions and between social classes, is the nature of the interfamilial relationships between three generations when grandparents are fit and relatively young. Earlier reference was made to the Rapoport's' question concerning the extent to which grandparents experienced tension between their newfound freedom and sense of responsibility to their children's need for support with the new family. They continue:

'The traditional benign imagery of grandparenthood creates a situation which (has been described) as a deprivation for some women who feel shock and disappointment at not having the opportunity to grandparent. Nevertheless the assumption ... that the idealised situation of availability and motivation

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situation which (has been described) as a deprivation for
some women who feel shock and disappointment at not having the

to grandparent will prevail is on the wane. Many grandmothers feel relief at shedding the duties of active motherhood and once launched into the outside world of work or voluntary activities, domestic concerns may become second class.

What is less well understood ... is the grandfather's potentials. His wishes and felt needs may be the obverse ... Having been denied the pleasures of active parenting, he may yearn for a phase of active grandparenting.⁴

This, they conclude, 'merits research'. It certainly does. We simply have no idea how true these assertions are, how, of whom, in what circumstances, and so on.

Another complicating factor, well known to those concerned with the study of ageing but perhaps less familiar to those who are 'child focused' is that some of these same 'young grandparents' find themselves heavily involved in the care of their parents at a time when they might wish either to be free of any wider family commitment or to give time and support to their children and grandchildren. Increasingly, we see situations in which four generations are involved and the frail elderly in their 80's are a source of major concern to their children in their sixties.

Thus, one can see the complexity of family needs and the conflicts which these may engender. The formulation of policies for family support needs to relate these issues one to the other. But, before effective policies can be formulated, what is going on in, and what people feel about this network of kinship needs to be more precisely understood.

It is in this second phase of the grandparental span that another factor has increasingly to be taken into account - namely, the marked increase in separation, divorce and remarriage which is a feature of the past decade and is not likely to decrease in the foreseeable future. Of course, it can happen to grandparents of any age but it is likely to affect most of them in their late 50's and 60's. Once again, as with so much of what I have to say, the facts are well known but the implications little explored. There has been a sharp increase

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in divorce in the 1970's and in remarriage and this needs to be considered from the angle of the grandparent and the grandchild. Without assuming any substantial increase in divorce, we will have a situation in which, in a given year, about 84,000 couples will divorce who have children under sixteen and the majority of these children will have four grandparents alive. Very many of those couples will soon re-marry and, in so doing, 'at a stroke' so to speak, there will be the possibility of two or four more grandparents 'on the scene', either because the new partner brings their children with them into the marriage or because the parents of the new partner are willing or anxious to assume grandparental roles. I will not further complicate the picture by discussing the implications of third marriages in terms of multiple grandparents!

We cannot ignore in all this the pain such marital breakdown may cause the parents of the separating or divorcing couple, for a wide variety of reasons. Some of these are related to the changing values between the generations placed upon marital constancy; some of underlying sense of failure marital breakdown may cause, some would say, irrationally, in the older generation. Thus, what has been well described as 'the modified extended family' are deeply involved in and affected by such processes.

We have little evidence of which I am aware about the extent that marital miseries are shared with parents and one suspects there may be very considerable variation according to many factors; including geographical proximity, social class, and the quality of the earlier relationship. From personal middle class experience, one notes how deeply reluctant some have been to share with their parents this dimension of unhappiness, where, for example, they would not have felt such difficulty if a spouse were ill. In such cases, the likelihood is that there is less free contact with grandchildren at such times and this may puzzle and distress their grandparents and the grandchildren..

However, quite the reverse may operate in other groups or classes in society; grandparents may be sucked into the marital discord at an early stage, which produces different complications for their grandchildren,

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especially when their elders are 'parti pris'.

In any case, at whatever stage, once the 'cat is out of the bag', new dimensions of emotional complexity enter into the situation. Maybe, 'in law' relationships were already strained and it is easy to slip into a collusion with one parent concerning the other's villainy. The grand child is thus left unhelped with the fact that in nine cases out of ten, he will love both his parents. Maybe, warm mutual feelings have grown up between the 'in laws'. Then, suddenly, relationships taken for granted are no longer clear. How should one relate to the former daughter in law? And, of course, to the new one? Socially, we are at a stage as family patterns change, when many of the older generation, parents and grandparents, but especially the latter, are genuinely uncertain about their social roles, quite simply about how to behave. A simple way to put it is 'Who on earth goes where for Christmas?'

However, confusion about social roles is only one facet of family relationships; of profound importance is the issue of continuity for our emotional well-being. This is a complex and contentious issue. The psychoanalyst, Bowlby, who persuaded a generation of professionals of the importance of consistent maternal care, has come under heavy fire from many sides, some of it based on a misunderstanding of what he actually said and some, as happened to Freud, based on repetition of his earlier views, which, like all people of intellectual stature, he revised as he went along. But he has persisted in a central thesis, epitomised in the following quotation from a lecture recently published on 'self reliance and the conditions that promote it'.⁵

'In order to provide the continuity of potential support that is the essence of a secure base, the relationships between the individuals concerned must persist over a period of time, measured in terms of years ... It must be borne constantly in mind that many of the most intense emotions arise during the formation, maintenance, the disruption and the renewal of those relationships in which one partner is providing a secure base for the other or in which roles alternate. Whereas the unchallenged maintenance of such relationships is experienced as a source of security, threat of loss gives rise to anxiety and often to anger and actual loss to the turmoil of feeling that is grief'... (p. 106)

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Gulls and goslings are in Bowlby's index: grandparents are not. But the relevance of that statement to grandparents is clear. For they will share in those feelings when continuity is threatened, perhaps at a stage in life when it is beginning to be valued more highly than change, that is to say, when the balance is altering between what Bowlby refers to as 'the immense importance in the lives of animals and men of the parameter familiar-strange.' He writes:

'In very many species ... whatever situation has become familiar to an individual is treated as though it provided safety, whereas any other situation is treated with reserve. Strangeness is responded to ambivalently; on the one hand, it elicits fear and withdrawal, on the other, it elicits curiosity and investigation. Which of these antithetic responses becomes dominant depends on many variables'... (and he includes) 'whether the individual responding is mature or immature, fit or fatigued, healthy or sick.'⁶

The application of these observations is of course for all ages and stages. But it may be a shared problem for both grandparents and their grandchildren. For many of both generations this will be a stage when familiarity is on the whole preferable to strangeness. Up to adolescence, children respond happily to familiarity in the form of domestic rituals and strangeness is welcomed only within a safe context of familiarity. The holiday, the visit to the fair, Christmas junketings, all very well, provided behind it things go on the same. Much the same may be true of their grandparents, whereas the teenager and young adult deliberately seeks out the strange to test out his identity separately from the adults who have reared him.

Thus far, I have been considering some of the social and emotional implications brought about by common patterns of divorce and remarriage. It is clear for all to see that we are in a process of transition which threatens the emotional security of children and their grandparents. If our social structure were different, if other kinds of kinship networks existed to provide the continuity of which I have been speaking (and I am sure anthropologists could point to some), this might not be

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the case. No doubt many families manage and cope with this re-structuring with little or no lasting damage to the emotional well-being to those concerned. But lasting damage is different from hurt. I am frankly cynical about the 'all good friends and no hard feelings' syndrome - at least until some time after the event. I think everyone is hurt.

At such times, therefore, unless for some reason relationships have been previously destructive, there is a pressing need for grandparents to be included both for their own needs and for those of the children. By inclusion, their self-esteem and dignity is maintained. However puzzled, anxious, hurt or angry they may be, those are simply adult human reactions and are preferable to feeling left out 'in the cold'. With occasional exceptions, I think they will be tougher than their children think. The grand children need their grandparents to be included because it is one vital element of continuity in their shifting pattern of relationship.

It is easy to make such pronouncements and much harder to carry them out, above all if the identification of grandparents with one of the marital pair is painfully obvious to a conflicted child. In this, as in so many aspects of family troubles, there is a place for developing family therapy across three generations and much room for advice and counselling to a perplexed and often well-intentioned older generation, who want to help and yet (that difficult phrase) 'do not want to interfere'. We have scarcely begun to do this.

However, grandparenthood in the young elderly is not all about divorce and remarriage! The programme 'Grannies shouldn't wear T shirts' reminded us of some important points concerning the way we internalise the images of our grandparents; next to parents, teachers and grandparents surely jockey for position in the vividness of the physical images we retain of them. The children interviewed gave acute descriptions of their grandparents, their hair, or lack of it, clothes, habits, including smoking, of which they disapproved, glasses - 'He used to wear them upside down to make us laugh'. Nor is this simply a function of frequent proximity. I saw my grandparents once a year and I can conjure up my grandfather's bald head, flourishing

used to wear them upside down to make us laugh. Nor is this simply a function of frequent proximity. I saw my grandparents once

whiskers and waistcoated corporation; my grandmother's elegant sadness, in a flash as I write these lines. In a very real sense, they remain a part of one, of a heritage and therefore assist in the formation of a sense of identity. These things are taken for granted - and so in a sense they should be. But those who have been in child welfare know they must not take this for granted. When one has seen the gaps in the lives of children in care, one does not lightly discard any relative, least of all grandparents, since they form part of the way the child finds out who and what he is.

Then there is what the BBC commentator called the 'indulgence quotient' - a nice phrase. It would I think be generally agreed, and it certainly was by the children interviewed, that grandparents had a certain licence to spoil. 'She spoils me incredibly,' one said: there were references to marmalade and tomato sauce, bacon and egg for breakfast (not cereals), roast potatoes, jellies and apple pies. (And, with a giggle, 'she gave me Guinness when I was a baby to make me sleep'). The stomach, as the commentator said, is 'a mighty bond'! Presumably this indulgence quotient is higher because the grandparents are freed of the tension between giving and withholding which is part of the necessary discipline of child rearing. Whilst this is on occasion a source of friction between parents and grandparents, most of us would agree that it is a healthy kind of friction and one on which the children usually thrive.

We move now to the third phase of grandparenting, when they are, so we say, 'the frail elderly'. Here we encounter a major problem in relation to some, but by no means all, in our country, that of geographical distance. Most of us would postulate that the ideal arrangement for most families would be one in which relationships were formed and normal difficulties overcome between the three generations at a stage in which the grandparents were young enough to be relatively independent and (with the proviso mentioned earlier) in a position to contribute in different ways support to the younger members. Then, as balance gradually shifts and the elderly become more dependent, there is a kind of store of past experience to balance the feelings aroused on both sides when the roles begin to be reversed and the child begins to parent his parent.

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Sadly, geographical mobility often precludes this gradual transition and for some the moment at which grandparents come to live with or near the family is the point at which their need for social care is dominant. Of course, geographical distance does not preclude earlier support from grandparents. But it complicates it. Abrams' study⁷ has some analysis of the relationships which the frail elderly have with their offspring. Of those who had any surviving children (and 30% had not), one in six lived in the same dwelling and another two in six lived very near - in the same street or neighbourhood. Sixty-two per cent said that at least one child lived within six miles. A further 32% had children more than six miles away, with about 6% whose children were abroad. Questions were asked of those who lived alone as to how often they saw their children; 52% saw them more than once a week, another 21% once a week. There were 10% who did not see them at all. Such figures tell us nothing, of course, about how often they saw their grandchildren or about the quality of the relationships lying behind the contact. They do tell us, however, that a great deal of contact takes place between parents and offspring. It is likely that grandchildren will be included, though by now they will usually be teenagers or young adults.

There are major problems concerning housing and transport which cannot be here addressed but which are crucial to the glib slogan 'where there's a will there's a way'. The slogan might perhaps be re-phrased: 'where planners and policy makers have a will, they might find a way'. Take, for example, the attractive idea of 'granny flats'. A useful DoE publication⁸ explores some of the practical logistical problems about this - as for example, what to do when granny dies or the couple have to move. This is relevant to the fact that 30% of the frail elderly have no children. In passing one notes that we have not explored fully ways in which we could stimulate relationships between the generations who are not 'kith and kin'. There are great risks of artificiality but housing policy may have a significant part to play in creating a more natural opportunity for such exchanges. So who comes to live in a granny flat when

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granny dies is a delicate and interesting issue, if housing stock is to be deployed well, yet the feelings of all concerned respected.

Transport is another major issue. Some local authorities operate concessionary or free fares for the elderly. But what use is that when the elderly person is too nervous or frail to leave the house and the younger generation too poor to afford the bus fares to visit? And there are many such poor families. The cost of a family visit to grandparents at a distance may be prohibitive.

Whatever the emotional goodwill, then, and all the evidence points to there being a great deal, there are serious practical problems to be surmounted if the degree of contact most people would like is to be sustained and if living arrangements are to be tolerable to all concerned. We are a very, very long way from resolving these.

The picture so often painted of a relatively carefree and rich relationship between very old grandparents and grandchildren is only one side of a coin. If an elderly person comes to live in the family at a time when their physical and/or mental powers are declining, if there is no bank of love, based upon the earlier experiences, it is not to be expected that grandchildren will easily accept the change in the domestic routine which this involves, above all when space is insufficient or when the behaviour of grandparents whose mental capacity has been damaged is a source of embarrassment to school-age children. And the old person may be painfully conscious of being an intruder. These things are obvious - everyone can draw upon personal experience. The trouble is that although we know them, we do remarkably little about them. If the phrase 'family system' is used meaningfully, it will frequently - increasingly - involve three or even four generations and will have implications for family therapy and counselling.

But problems are not all this paper is about. Grandparents and grandchildren often have something deep and special going between them. In a way, it is a pity to analyse it. But given the changes and difficulties that do beset us, we need to learn more from the good and sound relationships. Granddad, we learnt from one child on the BBC, used to

culties that do beset us, we need to learn more from the good and sound relationships. Granddad, we learnt from one child on the BBC, used to

watch the racing on TV, do the garden and keep pets - a rabbit, a cat, and goldfish. After he died, ' we had to put the cat to sleep and the heron ate most of the goldfish.' 'He used to switch the TV over a lot - always changing the programmes, it was really annoying when he was alive. But now he's dead and it's a funny feeling watching it without him.'

Perhaps they both had time - the very old and the very young - simply to be together and to share the simple joys for which the middle-aged have so little time.

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