

Ambivalence and the paradoxes of grandparenting

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Abstract

This paper focuses on 'normative talk' about grandparenting. It is based on a secondary analysis of a study involving 46 interviews with grandparents. It identifies two main cultural norms of grandparenting that emerged from the data – 'being there' and 'not interfering'. There were very high levels of consensus in the study that these constituted what grandparents 'should and should not' do. However, these two norms can be contradictory, and are not easy to reconcile with the everyday realities of grandparenting. The study found that norms of parenting and also of self determination were also very important for the grandparents in the study. They had a keen sense of what being a 'good parent' (to their own adult children) should mean – especially in terms of allowing them to be independent – but this could sometimes conflict with their sense of responsibility to descendant generations of grandchildren. Using the concept of ambivalence and drawing on the accounts of grandparents in the study, the paper explores and offers an explanation for both the coexistence and conflict between different sets of norms, as well as for the remarkably high levels of consensus about 'being there' and 'not interfering'. The paper concludes with a discussion of some of the limitations of the data and the analysis, and with suggestions for the development of further work in this area.

Introduction

'You can send them (grandchildren) home when you've had enough, but sometimes you don't want to'

(Mrs Wilkinson, 74, grandmother, on how being a grandparent is different from being a parent)

Grandparenting is an increasingly common experience, and it is also an ambivalent one for many grandparents, as Mrs Wilkinson indicates so concisely. She hints at the pleasures of grandparenting, including a relative freedom from the kinds of responsibilities that parents have for children, but she betrays a sense of regret that she lacks control over the relationship – sometimes 'you don't want to' send them home but, she implies, *you must*.

What she also does is to speak of grandparenting using a form of 'normative talk' that she expects will be familiar to the listener.

In this paper we focus on normative talk, by identifying the two main defining cultural norms of grandparenting that were identified in a study of grandparents – 'being there' and 'not interfering'. We go on to explore their resonance in contemporary accounts of what grandparenting is and how it 'should be done'¹. We shall argue that these 'grandparenting norms' conflict with others that are significant for contemporary grandparents, specifically norms about good parenting, and about the moral value of independence and self determination. Norms like these are moral abstractions that are not straightforwardly translatable into everyday practice. We shall argue that conflicts between the norms themselves on the one hand, and norms and realities of everyday life on the other, are likely to produce inherent paradoxes in the meaning and experience of contemporary grandparenting, and that a focus on ambivalence is a useful way of revealing these.

These paradoxes are lived out in grandparents' lives as contradictions between norms and realities in everyday life, and are manifest in ambivalence of the kind expressed by Mrs Wilkinson. The concept of ambivalence is useful here, not least because this is likely to be associated with an intellectual puzzle to be explored and explained. We use the concept throughout the paper because of its capacity to encompass simultaneously occurring negative and positive feelings as well as practices and norms in family relationships (for example, resentment and affection, care and control). We suggest that these abound in the lives of grandparents (see also Smart, 2005), and more generally that ambivalence usefully complicates normative views of family as expressing either solidarity or conflict, or positive or negative emotions, because it establishes that these sentiments and practices are frequently or normally concurrent. This concept has been used in other studies, particularly in relation to intergenerational relations between parents and children, as a way of examining how structured sets of social relations are reproduced in interpersonal relations and how taken-for-granted expectations within families are negotiated (Connidis and McMullin, 2002; Luescher and Pillemer, 1998; Goldscheider *et al.*, 2001). For example, individuals can experience ambivalence when what they perceive to be social structural arrangements (for example socially prescribed roles such as 'mother' or 'daughter') constrain their attempts to exercise agency in the negotiation of relationships. Ambivalence as a sociological concept is popular in post-modern and feminist theorising, where it is used to argue that individuals are confronted by conflicting pressures and ideas (Luescher and Pillemer, 1998).

This paper is based on a secondary analysis of data from a follow-up interview study, conducted as part of a larger project on grandparenting, funded in the ESRC 'Growing Older' Programme (Clarke and Roberts, 2004).² Overall, the project involved 850 grandparents in the ONS Omnibus Survey and 46 more detailed follow-up interviews with a sub sample of the national study to give a mix of gender, marital status and experience of family break-

down in grandchildren's families. The follow-up study was not successful in gaining any minority ethnic grandparents, and indeed only 7 had participated in the entire national survey. Some interviews were conducted with couples and others with individuals; in total, 23 grandfathers and 38 grandmothers were interviewed. The youngest grandparent was aged 44 and the oldest was 86 years of age – the median age was 65 years. The majority (70%) were retired, 13% were working full-time, 10% part-time, while 7% of the grandparents were unemployed.

The national survey revealed that there was great diversity in the characteristics of grandparents and their families (Clarke and Cairns, 2000, 2001a, 2001b). One third of grandparents were below the age of 60, one third were in their sixties and one third were 70 or older. Three-quarters (73%) were married or partnered, 30% were working (63% of those under age 60), over one third (38%) had some grandchildren whose parents had separated and a quarter (24%) had step-grandchildren. Six out of ten (61%) grandparents saw a grandchild at least once a week but 20% saw them only in the school holidays or less frequently and 2% never saw their grandchildren. The survey measured the frequency and nature of the support given to families by grandparents but in this paper we focus on the meaning of contemporary grandparenthood which was explored in the 46 follow-up interviews.

The follow-up interview study asked a standard set of survey style questions using a mix of open-ended and pre-coded formats.³ The focus was primarily on grandparents' normative views and evaluations of grandparenting, together with gaining more information about their own grandparenting experiences than was possible in the quantitative study. The data set does not include detailed qualitative case study material. Our paper draws on the main part of the follow-up study data set – namely the normative data – and identifies some rather striking patterns within it for further analysis. Our focus throughout is upon *publicly expressed norms about grandparenting* and the ambivalence surrounding these.

In the first section of this paper we examine the tensions between 'not interfering' on the one hand, and the norms and practices involved in parenting on the other. In the second section we turn to the contradiction between 'being there' and 'having time to oneself', which we have called the paradox of self determination.

'Not interfering' and the paradox of parenting

The edict that grandparents should 'not interfere' was the most prominent normative theme running through the follow-up interview data. In fact, 88% of answers to the direct open-ended question 'What do you think grandparents should and should not do' mentioned 'not interfering' explicitly, *using those very words*.⁴ Sometimes grandparents also talked about not interfering when describing their own experiences. This constitutes a very high level of norma-

tive (and linguistic) consensus and it applied to all grandparents, regardless of socio-economic and demographic characteristics, including gender and age. While gender and age were found to be characteristics on which grandparents varied in terms of contact with and practical support of grandchildren in the analysis of the quantitative survey, these characteristics were not important discriminators in the findings from the follow-up interviews on the current topic. We suggest that this is worthy of explanation and further analysis.

Overall, people in the follow-up study were keen to point out that interfering was wrong, and to distance themselves from this practice. Mrs. Young's response was typical:

Mrs Young: (*grandparents should*) Not interfere for a start, don't interfere. But always be there. (*grandmother, 70*)

But what does 'interfering' mean in practice and why is it so important? We know, for example, that it does not equate straightforwardly to grandparental involvement in grandchildren's lives because if it did, and given grandparents' keenness to be seen as 'non-interfering', we would expect to see limited patterns of involvement. However, the reverse is the case. In the follow-up interview study, although there were differences of degree, all of those who identified 'not-interfering' as important had regular and frequent contact with grandchildren, with most having some contact every week or daily, and most were involved in providing some kind of practical support. Those patterns are not at odds with the quantitative data on forms and patterns of support in grandparent-grandchild relationships, which show that 61% of grandparents look after grandchildren under the age of 15 during the day, and 55% babysit in the evenings. Over half (52%) of grandparents take grandchildren to activities outside the home and 53% have grandchildren under 15 to stay overnight, while 13% have taken grandchildren under 15 on holidays. Two-thirds (65%) of grandparents have given money to grandchildren under 15.

Being involved, therefore, does not straightforwardly constitute interfering. Of course the two words have very different moral connotations, with interfering by definition being seen as a bad thing, and it is therefore significant that grandparents invariably used that word, rather than other synonymous terms. We suggest that in doing this they were marking a moral boundary and identifying themselves as people who were not only fully aware of where the boundary was, but also securely located on the 'right' side of it. They were consciously appealing to shared cultural understandings and a well known language about grandparenting.

However, in practice the boundary between being involved and interfering is not self evident, and it is one that the grandparents in the follow-up interview study sometimes had considerable difficulty in negotiating. We want to suggest that in order to understand why 'not interfering' is simultaneously so important and so difficult, we need to hold in focus the fact that grandparents are also *parents*, who have active relationships with their own children (and

their partners) as well as with their grandchildren. Grandparents are trying to parent and grandparent simultaneously, and the norms attached to each are not always synonymous, which can result in considerable ambivalence. This is compounded by the fact that when we explore further what exactly it is that grandparents are not supposed to interfere in, it is of course the bringing up of grandchildren, as well as their own children's approach to parenting, and, more generally, their independence and autonomy.

A clear norm about the parenting of adult children is that you should allow them to be, indeed facilitate their becoming, both independent and autonomous. Parenting adult children is said to be about a process of 'letting go', whilst providing the right kind of support to allow them to become independent (Finch and Mason, 1993, 2000; Holdsworth, 2004). As Mrs Smith (76; grandchildren aged 4–16) put it: 'they're adults they've got their lives to lead'. For the grandparents in the follow-up study, allowing children to lead their own lives also involved allowing them to bring up their own children in their own way, and recognising the legitimacy of their parental authority. For some, this was expressed as a sense of a 'proper' order of responsibilities over time and generations. The following interview excerpt illustrates these points:

Mrs Graham: (*grandparents should*) support their children, maybe give them a little respite, erm not interfere, because different generations bring up their children differently and it doesn't necessarily mean that whatever's been right for one generation is, I think as far as morals and truthfulness and loving each other and close family relationships, those don't alter but I think on the social sides kids are brought up differently with each generation and I don't really see that it's really the grandparents' business to interfere. If they've brought up their children in terms of what they think is right and proper, the parents would I think automatically erm hand on these values to their own children. (grandmother, 69; grandchildren aged 9 and 10)

The interview participants indicated that there are two problems with interfering with your children's childrearing practices. First, there is the suggestion that it is *not good for children* to be receiving inconsistent messages, or for the authority of their parents to be questioned by a grandparent. But secondly, and just as important, is the argument that this is *not the way to parent* one's own children. 'Interfering' in this way is tantamount to bad parenting because good parenting is about facilitating your adult children's transition from dependence to independence and autonomy. Mrs Graham elaborates this point by suggesting that grandparents who have brought their children up well would have no need to interfere because good parenting values are passed on through good parenting itself. In other words, *how children are brought up affects how they turn out*. There was general consensus about this in the follow-up interview study, and this is a familiar contemporary cultural norm of course, which is shored up by expert discourses that build on the so called 'psy'

disciplines (especially psychoanalysis), to penetrate a wide variety of social institutions and cultural practices (Rose, 1996)

The problem for grandparents, however, is this. As grandparents they have an interest in how their grandchildren or descendants 'turn out'. They also usually have considerable and long term experience of parenting. This means that they may feel they know the consequences of certain types of parenting practice, because they have been around long enough to see how their children 'turned out' as adults and to connect this with how they were brought up as children. This gives grandparents a first hand sense of what works in parenting, as well as what does damage, and what makes no difference. Norms of good parenting (of adults) push them in the direction of allowing their children to be independent, yet their sense as grandparents of some responsibility for descendant generations combined with their knowledge of the consequences of specific parenting practices push them in quite another.

Although the overwhelming majority of interviewees said that grandparents should not interfere, in practice the more contact grandparents have with their grandchildren, particularly when they are young and still in the process of being 'brought up', the more difficult this is. Frequent face-to-face contact puts grandparents in situations where they are especially at risk of their actions being defined as interfering,⁵ particularly where parents are not always present. Here, grandparents can form direct relationships with grandchildren, and they also have to make routine decisions, for example about discipline and reward. These are closely associated with 'bringing up' a child, and with how they turn out as moral beings, and there was clear agreement that a grandparent should not displace a parent in this respect, nor in the child's affections.

Nevertheless, although there was near universal agreement that grandparents should not interfere, people in the follow-up interview study suggested that in practice, there were certain circumstances that might make this acceptable. Of course, as suggested earlier, the very act of identifying a boundary between involvement and interference that one should not cross, means that grandparents are defining acceptable involvement on one side of that boundary and it thus allows a space for them to define their practices as on the 'right' side. One of the interviewees took this logic a little further, in identifying herself as a self-confessed interferer/transgressor but in a humorous way, and simultaneously acknowledging that she knew all about the norm of non-interference.

Interviewer: What do you think grandparents should and should not do?

Mrs Stafford: That's a good question (laughs) you mean involving myself with the parents against the grandchildren do you mean?

Interviewer: Anything that comes to mind.

Mrs Stafford: Well I tend to say you shouldn't do this and you shouldn't do that and the parents say, no mum that's nothing to do with you.

Interviewer: So you do say to the children when you think something's wrong?

Mrs Stafford: (laughs) I don't know I expect you would call it interfering (laughs).

Interviewer: Can you give me an example?

Mrs Stafford: No because I do it all the time.

Interviewer: Ok if they shouldn't interfere, what should grandparents do?

Mrs Stafford: Erm well I do listen, I know you've got to listen to them, but *then I've always got an answer* you see but then that's me and that's all I can say really about the lot of them because if something goes wrong with them nanny interferes (laughs) or put my point shall we say that. It sometimes doesn't go down very well with the parents. (our emphasis) (grandmother 55, grandchildren aged 3–12)

In a sense, Mrs Stafford's comments highlight what many grandparents felt quite keenly (although most denied that they personally interfered), and that is the value or indeed the weight of their own considerable experience of parenting. This weight of knowledge and experience, and the associated risk of interfering, was particularly acute for some of the grandmothers in the follow-up study, and gender is clearly a significant factor here. Grandmothers were not only likely to have taken the major role in care of their own children when they were young, but also as we know more generally from the national survey data, they are more involved than grandfathers in providing practical and day-to-day support, including childcare, to grandchildren.

Grandparents in the study tended to say that in extreme circumstances or crisis situations, or in cases where they might be privy to contextual knowledge that the parents did not have, or where their experience simply suggested that important parenting mistakes were being made that would have long lasting implications (for example in the character formation of the grandchildren), then interference might possibly be countenanced – at least by themselves, if not by their children. In the following example the Quinns describe weighing up and negotiating around the options, sometimes using quite nuanced ways of interacting to get a point of advice across subtly, in ways that might not be construed as interfering:

Interviewer: And have you ever had a difference of opinion with the parents about how they bring up [grandson] at all?

Mrs Quinn: Erm it's something that I think probably we've always been very careful not to give our point of view.

Mr Quinn: Not to interfere if we can, there's nothing worse.

Mrs Quinn: I think once or twice possibly the only way we've shown we disapprove of something is we go very quiet (laughs) and we kind of hold back and then normally they know that there's something, and it's probably something to do with, if, they're not, it's like most young couples today, I suppose I was brought up or I brought my children up to be in a routine and they don't seem to have that today and I think sometimes children need the kind of stability of a routine especially when they're 5 so that they know the limitations if you like and you can make exceptions and probably the only time I've felt uptight is about something like that where I think oh he's been out til half past nine at night erm and erm that's fine for you know exceptions and there may have been exceptions but it's just that I've thought you know they've got cross with him cause he's tired and I think well you know what's he doing out he shouldn't be out at that time.

Mr Quinn: But we wouldn't come out and say to them.

Interviewer: So you'd never say anything.

Mrs Quinn: Oh no no.

Mr Quinn: We would never say you're doing wrong.

Mrs Quinn: It's nothing I mean it's nothing so major that I've felt, if I thought it was something really major then obviously we'd say our piece and probably say leave it at that. (grandmother and grandfather, 53 and 58; grandchildren aged 5–14)

Importantly, it was clear that it would be alright to get involved in the domain of parenting if the grandparents' own children (or children in law) asked for help or advice, and many grandmothers and grandfathers saw their role as encouraging their children to do this – they defined this as part of 'being there'. As Mr Logan put it:

Mr Logan: And I say to both my daughters, if you have a problem come and see me don't try and sort it out yourself come to me and so erm I think it's just keeping a guardian eye over things but not interfere, stand back really. (grandfather, 66; grandchildren aged 1–21)

These examples help to illustrate why 'not interfering' is such a resonant norm amongst the grandparents in the follow-up interview study, and also why it is so difficult to work out how to put it into practice in the context of real relationships. By 'interfering' grandparents potentially damage their own reputations as good parents, either because good parents should not interfere, or because if they had brought their own children up well they would not need to. As we have suggested, the risks are likely to be greater for grandmothers than grandfathers. Grandparents also risk jeopardising the quality of their relationships with their own children as well as their

grandchildren and other relatives. The ultimate sanction for interfering too much, which several grandparents told us they were keenly aware of, would be that their children would break off contact with them, or between them and the grandchildren. But at a normative level, 'not interfering' and 'good parenting', both of which apply to grandparents (who do not stop being parents simply because their children have had children, cf Douglas and Ferguson, 2003), are not always synonymous either. This is especially the case where to fail to intervene in some way might be construed as bad parenting, or a lack of love, care or responsibility on behalf of the grandparents towards their own children. Grandparents have to try to negotiate their sense of responsibility – a kind of *moral guardianship* – for descendant generations and how they 'turn out' with the conflicting norm of non-interference, often in everyday mundane decisions, and this leads to considerable ambivalence. The data from the follow-up interview study suggests that grandparents continue to actively engage in norms about *parenting*, not just grandparenting, through these negotiations, and that in order to understand both the strength and the ambivalence in grandparenting norms we have to keep parenting firmly in the frame.

We now turn to a discussion of the other key grandparenting norm, that of 'being there', and its uneasy relationship with contemporary norms of independence and self determination.

'Being there' and the paradox of self determination

We began the last section with a quote from Mrs Young about the importance of 'not interfering'. She finished the sentence with the words, 'but always be there'. 'Being there' is the normative companion – we might even say the 'caring face' – of 'not interfering' and was the other central norm of grandparenting to emerge from the follow-up interview study; it was evoked in 86% of the interviews. Once again, the 'being there' response applied to all grandparents, regardless of socio-economic and demographic characteristics including gender and age, although there were some differences in terms of what it meant based on actual experience that we explore below. Being there evokes the image of a grandparent waiting in the wings, at the ready to be called upon for practical, emotional or financial support when the time is right for the parents and grandchildren, and in that sense it is an 'other-orientated' concept. Normatively, it establishes that 'not interfering' is nothing to do with a lack of love or interest but rather the grandparent who 'is there' is someone who is constant and supportive, but does not make 'unreasonable' demands or initiate contact 'out of turn'. 'Being there', along with 'not interfering', is thus a highly passive norm.

Yet at the same time, grandparents in this study evoked the ideal of each individual as self-determining and 'independent'. There is of course much debate around the idea of individual life projects and specifically about how

that can be reconciled with the connectivity and relatedness of people's lives (Brannen and Nilsen, 2005; Jamieson, 1999; Mason, 2004). However, most theorists would agree that a capacity for self-determination, including both a sense of personal agency and a willingness to take responsibility for one's own actions, has come to be seen as a morally desirable component of personhood (Skeggs, 2004; McNay, 2004; Brannen and Nilsen, 2005; Ribbens McCarthy *et al.*, 2003). Being 'one's own person', and accountable for oneself, has come to be valued as part of a contemporary sense of identity for adults of all ages. Indeed, the grandparents in the follow-up interview study tended to portray their lives in terms of choosing how to conduct family relationships, being responsible for their own lives and not expecting offspring to take on too many responsibilities for ageing and ailing parents. At the same time, they viewed their children as independent adults who should only expect a certain level of support from the grandparents. Thus self-determination emerged as a central ideal.

In emphasising the significance of a norm of self-determination, we are not suggesting that grandparents wanted little or no involvement in their grandchildren's lives. As we have pointed out, the majority of grandparents saw at least some of their grandchildren frequently, and most were involved in providing practical support. Furthermore, in the Omnibus survey, 94% of respondents agreed with the statement 'my grandchildren are a very rewarding part of my life'. But the norm of 'being there' is at odds with current notions of identity as self-determining and autonomous and the passivity required of a grandparent who 'is there' and does not 'interfere' does not sit comfortably with the agentic individual who shapes her or his own relationships. Reconciling these opposing norms requires a negotiation between relationality and independence, as well as balancing one's own needs and wishes with those of different family members. These various pushes and pulls can often compete with each other, sometimes requiring grandparents to make a choice between for example offering regular child care support or developing their own interests and activities.

Unsurprisingly therefore, although the ideal of 'being there' sounds laudable and positive, it did pose a problem to the grandparents in this study and they were ambivalent about it (cf. Douglas and Ferguson, 2003). Some felt that they were expected to 'be there' not according to their own wishes but as a reserve and a child care repository, to be called upon for practical, emotional and financial support when required by the parents. Thus although the grandparents almost unanimously gave support to the sentiment that a 'good' grandparent should 'be there' for their children and grandchildren, they did express some resentment over the expectation that they relinquish their self-determination and there was no small degree of ambivalence when talking of specific relationships and situations.

For example the Murphys were circumspect when discussing the impact that their grandchildren's frequent, practically daily, visits had on how they experienced their own home:

Interviewer: Do you think that being a grandparent has changed your life in any way, good or bad?

Mrs Murphy: It's difficult to say. Well it's only changed in that the house isn't our own, it isn't let's be honest it isn't because one or the other of them is always in or out.

Mr Murphy: There's more work for you isn't there because you know if they're here she's got to get some food.

Mrs Murphy: Sometimes Tom will bring in two boys with him and they all want food and drink (laughs).

Mr Murphy: Oh yes.

Mrs Murphy: Yes that is nothing unusual oh yes and he knows that's all right so you know.

Mr Murphy: And the phone bill – oh my god.

Mrs Murphy: Oh yes but they always say 'Can I use the phone Grandma?' Oh yes they ask but he's got his own mobile now so he isn't on mine quite so much. (grandmother and grandfather, 65 and 67; grandchildren aged 6–17)

This implies that the ambivalence the Murphys experienced was the result of their lack of control over their own space. This impacted upon each of them differently, with Mrs Murphy shouldering more of the domestic responsibilities as most of the women in the follow-up study tended to do. The gendered relations of domestic space in later life, taken together with grandmothers' greater involvement in practical and child care support for their grandchildren, means that the practices involved in 'being there' as well as ambivalence arising from contradictory norms are themselves likely to be gendered (see also Mason, 1990).

Ironically, in this case, the loss of self-determination seemed to be the result of the easy relationship the Murphys had succeeded in building with their grandchildren because they were 'good' grandparents, which included doing many activities with the grandchildren and going on holiday with them. This was perhaps a particularly important point to them because the parents had divorced and the children were living with the Murphys' ex-daughter-in-law (we discuss this aspect of grandparenting below). In her overview of American research, Lye (1996) found that the conflicting norms of obligation and independence must be delicately balanced in intergenerational relationships.

In seven of the interviews (involving three men and six women) grandparents talked of the importance of 'having time to oneself' or of not always being 'on call', which in some ways conflicted with the norm of 'being there', and this was the source of some ambivalence. The strong theme in these cases was that

grandparents felt they had already brought up one generation of children and had fulfilled their duty and it is perhaps not surprising that more grandmothers than grandfathers spoke in these terms. They were willing to offer occasional support but did not want to be relied on in a routine fashion or to 'be there' unequivocally. Some grandparents who were in employment felt they deserved free time to themselves without extra responsibilities. Others, who were retired, felt they wanted to enjoy their retirement, something they felt they had earned by bringing up their children and working all their adult lives. This chimes with cultural understandings and norms in relation to retirement as a time for that 'well-earned' rest. Indeed 23% of the respondents of the ONS survey in 1999 agreed with the statement 'Now that my children have grown up I want a life that is free from too many family duties'. However, the follow-up interview data and other research indicates that this ideal is not easily reached, particularly for women who continue to carry the main responsibility for domestic work (Arber and Ginn, 1991; Mason, 1989).

Overall, the grandparents tended to present their involvement with their grandchildren as dependent upon what the parents wanted and needed, and their accounts suggested that they did not exhibit a high degree self-determination in this respect, even where they had very frequent contact. At times of crisis – divorce and separation being the most commonly cited example – some grandparents had stepped in and taken over major child care responsibilities (see also Arthur *et al.*, 2003; Douglas and Ferguson, 2003; Smart, 2005; Thompson, 1999). However, this did not automatically mean that they were henceforth entitled to expect the same level of contact or a continued closer involvement in the lives of their grandchildren. For example, Mrs Elliott looked after her granddaughter on a regular basis but still did not feel she had a guaranteed right of access to her:

Mrs Elliott: I mean I've had to grovel to [daughter] before when I know I've been right. But I've had to do because I've always had the fear that . . .

Interviewer: You've had to grovel to see [granddaughter]?

Mrs Elliott: Well not to see [granddaughter] but I've had the fear that if I hadn't have grovelled that day then she might have done that, because I think [daughter] would sometimes when she's really really piggy, she would stop me. I don't know what good it would do because I think [granddaughter] would probably drive her mad saying I want to go I want to go.

Interviewer: But you have to keep on her good side.

Mrs Elliott: Yes.

Interviewer: That's terrible it's like a power relationship.

Mrs Elliott: Yes, it's awful I can't believe it. I mean being a grandparent is a privilege but it's not something you should have to grovel for. (grandmother, 56; grandchild aged 6)

The fact that Mrs Elliott talks about ‘*grovelling*’ to sustain a relationship which her daughter could potentially end at any moment is particularly significant when it is revealed that she looks after her granddaughter six days a week. She describes a situation that she feels is dependent on the mother’s approval, apparently almost on a daily basis. This is why Mrs Elliott feels she needs to keep on her daughter’s good side, which she clearly resents. The situation was particularly sensitive because Mrs Elliott explained that although she is not close to her daughter, she feels (sometimes uncomfortably) almost a parent to her granddaughter.

That the quality of the relationship grandparents had with their grandchildren was largely dependent on how good their relationship was with the parents was particularly evident in cases where the parents had separated and the grandchildren lived with the interviewees’ ex-daughter-in-law, and again we see some gender differences here. The quantitative results showed that overall, grandparents had less contact with a son’s children than with a daughter’s children (cf. Johnson, 1988; Mills *et al.*, 2001). This was even more so if the parents were separated or divorced (cf. Douglas and Ferguson, 2003; Smart 2004). The follow-up study interviews shed some more light on this matter. Where the grandparents and the residential parent had no relationship, the grandparents also tended to have no relationship with the grandchildren.

At the other extreme, some grandparents continued to have a close relationship with their grandchildren, almost stepping in to take the role of the non-residential parent, as in the case of the Murphys (see also Finch and Mason, 1990). The excerpt below indicates that the Murphys to some extent saw their initial decision to provide support to the grandchildren and their ex-daughter in law as atoning for the ‘sins’ of their son. However, this set in train a relationship involving regular and routine support, about which they now feel ambivalent:

Mr Murphy: I mean I suppose we’ve had so much [to do] with the grandchildren because of what [our son] did.

Mrs Murphy: Yes when he left his wife and she had two young, a baby and a little boy so we were there all those years really for them.

Mr Murphy: Yes I mean really she didn’t have, well she was left with nothing and we were fortunate that we were able to do it and we did it. I think sometimes she thinks we’re here to do everything that’s what I think.

Interviewer: Oh you mean she thinks that you should be responsible because your son left her?

Mrs Murphy: Well it was for a very long time yes.

Mr Murphy: For a very long time.

Mrs Murphy: And it’s even a little that way now, I mean we don’t mind the children coming anytime, they always ring up and say ‘Can I come and sleep

tonight Nanna' and I'll say 'Yes alright, well mum's going out is it?'. But she takes it for granted that we're going to have them and we will, no problem but she does take it for granted.

Mr Murphy: If she would ask sometimes, we would never say no but I would feel much better but she doesn't ask and she doesn't tell us a thing so. (grandmother and grandfather, 65 and 67; grandchildren aged 6–17)

Continuing to be close to and offer considerable support to a former daughter-in-law, which could perhaps be regarded as 'out of the ordinary', was not straightforward. On the one hand, the grandparents were pleased to continue to play an important role in the lives of their grandchildren, yet they could complain that the 'ex-in-law' parent expected too much of them (cf. Ribbens McCarthy *et al.*, 2003).

Thus the automatic expectation that grandparents 'be there' with little regard for their autonomy and self-determination, which could be problematic at the best of times, could become more so if the parents had separated and the grandchildren lived with the parent who was not related by blood to the grandparents. In that sense, the norm of 'being there' does not tally with the '*ordinary complexity*' (Mason and Tipper, forthcoming) of contemporary family relationships and household arrangements – there is not necessarily or even usually one single place to be, nor one single family 'unit' to be there for (see also Smart, 2005).

Any close relationship requires the individuals involved to find a reasonable balance between being close and maintaining a degree of separation. In their study of family obligations, Finch and Mason (1993) found that family members work hard to negotiate a 'proper balance' of exchange, thus also seeking an acceptable degree of dependence. It is important to point out though, that negotiations take place over time and commitments develop cumulatively. Once a level of support has been established, as with the Murphys' support to their ex-daughter in law and their grandchildren, it may be difficult to draw back from it. Some of the grandparents in the follow-up interview study had negotiated a lesser childcare role over time, but had found this negotiation difficult. These grandparents expressed feelings of guilt about having said no or having requested a diminished childcare load. One can imagine that Mrs Elliott, cited above, might find this extraordinarily difficult, given how fragile and dependent on her daughter's approval she perceived her relationship with her granddaughter ultimately to be. An example from Mrs Forster, who cares for her grandchild four days a week, demonstrates her need to justify her unwillingness to do more which belies a sense of guilt that perhaps she is not 'being there' sufficiently:

Mrs Forster: I think my son took, not took advantage but I think he thinks I'm the nanny so I'll have him, but I do, now I do say no at times because I do get really tired and I think I'm not just here, although I love them, I feel

as though I'm not here for them all the time. Although I don't go out I mean I'm not one for partying or anything like that but I've got other interests, I like reading and, but it is very tiring, it does tire me out. But erm if I can help them out I help them out.

[. . .]

Interviewer: And what's the worst thing [about being a grandparent]?

Mrs Forster: Oh when they put on you a bit sometimes. You know, well not put on you but I think sometimes my son thinks I'm just here to look after [grandson]. I think he thinks well you're a Nan now because sometimes he'll say 'Well you are his Nan' and I think he thinks I'm here just for that but I'm not you know. So now I do say no.

(grandmother, 51; both grandchildren aged 2)

Mrs Forster seems keen to impress upon the interviewer that she has 'legitimate excuses' (Finch and Mason, 1993) for saying no, and she compensates by saying that she will help if she can (Finch and Mason, 1993). In fact, the examples of the Murphys, Mrs Elliott and Mrs Forster all help to establish that 'being there' – although a consensual norm at one level – has to be negotiated in practice in situations where family members have conflicting and shifting ideas of what it entails, and where ultimately grandparents see the parents as occupying the more powerful position.

Discussion

This paper has focused on two predominant norms of grandparenting that emerged in the follow-up study – 'not interfering' and 'being there'. We have used the concept of ambivalence to help us to understand both co-existence and conflict between these norms and others that apply to grandparents, namely norms of good parenting and self determination. The idea of ambivalence has also helped to reveal the relationship between abstract norms and what the follow-up interviewees said about the lived reality of family relationships. In the process, we have suggested that, in order to understand the apparent strength and ubiquity of these grandparenting norms, we need to keep parent-adult child relationships and cultural understandings of what is important in these firmly in the frame⁶. Although we have identified an uneasy fit between different sets of norms, as well as between norms and everyday practices, we have also suggested that this is a situation that grandparents can readily speak about and that they live with routinely. Ambivalence is a productive concept in the analysis of such relationships because it allows us to conceptualise this kind of routine discordance as part of ordinary family lives.

Given the findings of other research on the negotiated character of family and normative or moral practices, we should perhaps not be surprised that

abstract norms are not simply 'applied to' grandparents' relationships with their children and grandchildren (Finch and Mason, 1993; Ribbens McCarthy *et al.*, 2003; Smart, Neale and Wade, 2001; Brannen, 2006). However, what is more unpredictable is the degree of consensus amongst grandparents in this study, and in other studies, over the two norms of grandparenting, 'not interfering' and 'being there', even though what these mean in practice may be different, especially for men and women. This consensus is worth remarking upon for two reasons.

First, as we have noted, grandparenting is not a uniform experience. There is considerable diversity amongst grandparents, for example in terms of their age, gender, marital and employment status, and in the generational combinations of their children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and so on, and this kind of diversity was reflected in the sample for the follow-up interview study. Although there is no such thing as a 'typical' grandparent, in this follow-up study at least there do seem to be at least two agreed-upon norms about what a grandparent should be and do which apply across the different socio-economic and demographic characteristics that were included. And secondly, there is something rather surprising about that normative consensus, especially given that we know that family obligations and responsibilities are not in general governed by such a consensus (Finch and Mason, 1991). Although our observations are based on a diverse rather than a statistically representative sample, the ubiquity of these norms in the follow-up interview data together with the uniform colloquial language in which they were often articulated indicates that they were being referred to as, and assumed to be, culturally familiar norms of some considerable authority and applicability.

Why is this? We cannot answer this question definitively on the basis of this particular study, but we can make some suggestions. We think that grandparenthood is at the fulcrum of a contradiction between two influential contemporary frameworks of understanding about responsibility for 'the self' – namely one's own 'self', and other people's 'selves'. Crudely put, the first involves the idea that adult individuals are or should be solely responsible for themselves (or their 'selves') and for their actions. The second involves an argument that what adults come to be is in large part determined by various social inputs – parenting, education and so on – especially those made during their childhoods. According to that version, adults are not entirely responsible for their own 'selves', but at the same time adults are partially responsible for the 'selves' of others, for example those whose upbringing they have influenced. Each of these frameworks of understanding has its own history and body of influential expert knowledge as well as popular cultural interpretations and manifestations (Rose, 1996)

Parents and children clearly have to negotiate their positions over time in relation to these familiar forms of understanding, but, arguably, grandparents (who are simultaneously parents) are in a much more troubling position because of the presence of second or third generation descendants which

complicates the picture of who, ultimately, is responsible for whose 'self'. We saw that grandparents in the follow-up interview study expressed a wish to find a balance between allowing their adult children to live their own lives while at the same time caring deeply about how they did so. They talked of the difficulties of feeling some sense of responsibility for, or investment in, how the grandchildren are brought up while also allowing their adult children to be independent and self-determining. If one takes too seriously the idea that people can be responsible for the 'selves' of others, and that good parenting 'breeds' good parenting (and bad breeds bad), then grandparents could potentially be held to account for the social 'defects' and poor parenting of many generations of descendants! This may be a terrifying prospect and, in that context, it may be comforting to be able to take refuge in a norm that lets you off the hook to some extent, by saying that you should not interfere, and another that says that this is not neglectful, as long as you are simultaneously 'being there'. However great the lack of fit between such norms and the reality of your own relationships with your children and grandchildren, and whatever the ambivalences that arise as a consequence, we think there are therefore considerable benefits for grandparents in endorsing these norms, notwithstanding the difficulties of accommodating them in practice.

In conclusion, although our analysis of data from the follow-up study has begun to tell us something rather interesting about relationships between norms of grandparenting and parenting, and ambivalence about them, we want to suggest that this is only part of the picture. What we can and cannot say in this paper is shaped by the nature of the follow-up study – its design, its sample, and the kinds of data it yielded. As secondary analysts of these data, we have worked within the boundaries of the original study, and sought to exploit its possibilities as fully as possible. But there are two particular ways in which our analysis is limited, which we suggest indicate productive directions for future work.

First, our analysis is highly likely to be culturally specific; we cannot say anything about normative understandings amongst minority ethnic people because none was included in the follow-up study. Yet we do know that there are differences in relation to norms of parenting between women of different ethnic origin, and also that these are complex and do not map straightforwardly or exclusively onto 'ethnic differences' (see Duncan and Edwards, 1999). It is highly likely that norms of grandparenting, and their conflict or otherwise with norms of parenting, take distinctive shapes and forms for people from different ethnic backgrounds, and in different cultural contexts, and this requires further exploration.

Secondly, the normative focus of the follow-up study could be complemented in further work by an analysis of nuances and differences in the experiences and contexts of grandparenting. This would further our understanding of how people relate normative understandings to the realities of their everyday lives, and would enable an exploration of the significance of the

salience of different experiences of, for example, social class, ethnicity, age, gender, partnering and so on. It would also allow an exploration of the development over time of specific grandparental relationships, which could contribute to the theorisation of relationalities and personal histories in grandparenting. In our view there is considerable benefit to be gained from a mixed methods approach to these kinds of questions, to harness the different capabilities of national large-scale surveys, and more qualitative approaches in addressing the complexities and ambivalences of contemporary grandparenting. The study with which we have been involved has taken a small step in this direction but there is a good deal further to go.

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Notes

- 1 These two norms have also been identified as central by Douglas and Ferguson (2003) in their study of the role grandparents play in families which have experienced divorce.
- 2 'Grandparenthood: its meaning and its contribution to older people's lives', ESRC L480254040, 1999–2002, Lynda Clarke, Ceridwen Roberts, Francis McGlone, Helen Cairns. Jennifer Mason and Vanessa May were not part of the original project team, but have conducted a secondary analysis of the data from the follow-up interview study in collaboration with Lynda Clarke.
- 3 The interviews were tape recorded and answers to open-ended questions were transcribed. Cross-sectional thematic and discursive analysis was carried out on a question by question basis, and using QSR NVivo. This was supported by more holistic analysis of key cases where sufficient personal data were available.
- 4 The small number of alternative answers were not at odds with the sentiment of 'not interfering' but tended to emphasise the idea of 'being there'.
- 5 We know from the quantitative study that the frequency of contact with grandchildren is related to how close they live and that demographic factors (age and gender of the grandparent and of the youngest grandchild) are more important than socio-economic factors. Grandparents are therefore unevenly 'at risk' of being in contexts that can lead to 'interfering'.
- 6 It should be noted that many of the grandparents in the follow-up study would also have had responsibilities to ascendant generations, and would have continued to be not only parents but also 'children'. The follow-up study did not address these ascendant relationships because of its focus down the generations, but they are likely to be an important part of the picture of how generational relations and norms are negotiated and experienced.

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