

Grandparents with Little or No Contact with Grandchildren-Impact on Grandparents

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is, through the voices of grandparents, to share the impact on grandparent wellbeing of having little or no contact with grandchildren. We use a constructivist interpretivist approach to interview grandparents to obtain their narratives. Our grandparents told us stories about their feelings of ambivalence towards their children and the lack of agency they experience. They share the impact of this on their physical and mental health and wellbeing. Grandparents' voices are missing from the literature in relation to this issue and this study uses current theory relating to grandparent identity and wellbeing to examine the data. Given the difficulties in enacting mandated family counselling, community workers need to be aware of those grandparents whose relationships with grandchildren are at risk and attempt preventative interventions. Increasing numbers of adults are experiencing grand parenting and as their wellbeing is to some extent linked to their ability to perform 'grand parenting' successfully, it is important that practitioners understand the support needs of grandparents and prioritise time to prevent grandparent estrangement from their grandchildren. This study is the first to attempt to share the experiences of grandparents experiencing this estrangement in Australia.

Keywords: Grandparent-grandchild relationships; Intergenerational relationships; Grandparent identity; Grandparent wellbeing

Introduction

As life expectancy has increased, grandparenting has become something more people experience over longer periods of time [1], for example, suggest that 3/4 of the UK population is likely to experience grandparenthood in their life time, and we can assume similar proportions in other western nations including Australia. There are greater expectations for grandparents to become involved in the lives of their grandchildren [2] and grandparenting is a key element influencing well-being in later life [3]. Mahne and Huxhold [4] suggest grandparent wellbeing is strongly and positively related to grandparent identity.

Grandparent identity itself is related to agency; a sense of control and feelings of self-determination that grandparents feel in enacting their grandparent role [5]. However, grandparents' feelings of agency are partially dependent on their relationships with their children given the parental generation act as gatekeepers in relation to access to grandchildren [6]. Grandparents are often able to develop strategies to manage this parental gatekeeping [5] but this agency (or lack of agency) can be particularly challenging for grandparents as they juggle power relationships, both as they were between themselves and their children in the past, and as they are now in the present. Relationships need to be renegotiated, and self-identity must be reconstructed. This often leads to ambivalence [7-10]: a conflict between the identities of grandparent-as-grandparent and grandparent-as-parent.

Thus, understanding grand parenting also requires an exploration of Identity theory. Adult identities are complex and influenced by many factors including expectations, societal and cultural norms and individual characteristics [11]. Social Identity Theory [12-14] argues that identity is the sense of self formed by being part of a group and that this self-changes as the person participates in different groups.

In this sense, grandparents develop a self-identity around their membership of the group 'grandparents'. This identity is crafted by individuals' judgements of how well they fit into, and meet the norms and expectations of, the group 'grandparents'. This self-judgement of

their performance is made against the evolving societal norms of grandparenting, which, whilst perhaps not overt, appear to be clearly understood [15].

Grandparents who judge themselves as 'less successful' are likely to have poorer wellbeing. The consequences of this are depression, anxiety, relational aggression and anger [16] which can last over significant periods of time [17]. Mahne and Huxhold, [4] argue that this is important because of its impact on grandparent wellbeing and that research needs to address this issue. This paper takes up the challenge by reporting on a study examining the consequences for a group of grandparents who are unable to perform their grandparenting role. It is not our aim to explore WHY this has occurred: rather, in this paper we explore the impact on the grandparents themselves. We ask: What is the impact on grandparents when they are unable to sustain meaningful involvement in the lives of their grandchildren: i.e. when they are unable to define themselves as 'successful' grandparents and shape a positive grandparent identity?

Methodology

Phenomenology [18,19] and a narrative approach [20,21] shaped our version of constructivist interpretivism [22]. We aimed to hear the participants' stories told in their own words in an attempt to understand their reality.

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Context

This study takes place in Australia where the Australian Bureau of Statistics report that 75% of children living in couple families with their biological father had contact with their paternal grandparents and 80% of children living in couple families with their biological mother had contact with their maternal grandparents [23]. The research team consisted of the two named authors. The first named author undertook all the interviews and analysis. Analysis checking was undertaken by the second author.

Participants

We used a purposive sampling strategy, specifically targeting grandparents who had little or no contact with their grandchildren. Potential participants were sent this definition and were self-selecting (we did not define limited but left it to grandparents' subjective judgements). We used a snowball recruiting strategy as follows. Information was first circulated via a number of strategies:

- Radio interviews (particularly around grandparent week which in Australia is a week in September each year) for a range of regional radio stations in New South Wales (NSW) and one in Perth, Western Australia
- Stories in newspapers (again mainly around grandparent week) – a large NSW daily and several regional papers in NSW
- Story in a Seniors' newspaper-Queensland-based but with a circulation across the eastern states of Australia
- Information on the website of a key grandparent support organisation-Queensland-based but with membership from across Australia

This initial publicity asked for people who were interested to contact the researchers. Once contact was initiated (by phone or email), formal information letters and consent forms were sent (email where possible, but some requested snail mail). No further contact was made to follow these up in an effort to ensure that there was no coercion felt by potential participants, so we do not know if these people, on receipt of further information, determined they did not meet our criteria or simply changed their minds given the formality associated with consent and participation. Consent forms were generally returned via email, and a small number came back in snail mail. Consent forms indicated appropriate times to phone to arrange a phone interview.

Included in the information letter was a request to pass on information about the study to others, who were then able to initiate contact if they so wished. We did not seek information from people who initiated contact with us to find out how they heard about the study.

85 grandparents/grandparent couples initiated contact and 38 followed through and contributed data. These 38 study participants consisted of 31 grandmothers and 7 grandfathers. Some of the grandparents were separated, divorced or widowed so spoke as sole grandparents whilst others were in relationships (not always the same relationship as had produced the children). We had 19 maternal and 16 paternal grandparents plus one paternal great grandmother who had limited access to the grandchildren born to her son. Two grandparents had limited contact with the children of both their daughters and their sons. The amount of contact between grandparents and grandchildren changed over time: we ensured that at the time of the interview there was either limited (as defined subjectively by the participants) or no contact occurring.

Method

We asked participants to identify if they would prefer a phone interview or to submit their stories in writing, using guiding questions to help them frame their responses. The majority of the participants (30) chose to have a phone interview. Seven elected to submit in writing and one couple asked if they could travel to meet the researcher and have a face-to-face interview together. All interviews were guided by the same questions and were semi-structured: that is the guiding questions were not asked directly of the participants but were used as a frame by the researcher to ensure that the issues were addressed. All interviews were undertaken by the first named researcher. The guiding questions were:

- Tell me about your grandchildren and their parents- who are they, where do they live in relation to you, what are their circumstances?
- What relationship do you have with your grandchildren? Has this changed at some point or has it always been this way? Is it different for different sets of grandchildren? Explain.
- Who are the grandchildren about whom you have concerns? Tell me your story-what is it like for you as a grandparent to these grandchildren? How does that make you feel? Give me some examples of the things that are happening that concern you?
- What would make things better for you as a grandparent?

We sought to make interviews as informal and relaxed as possible so that we could elicit participants' experiences and stories in their own words, and told in their own way. The aim of this semi-structured approach was to ensure the participants could tell their stories in their own way and in their own words. The interviewer did not interrupt, focused on listening intently, and used a range of prompts (such as 'hmm, tell me more about that, 'what happened then?' and 'how did that make you feel?') in order to communicate engagement. Interviews were recorded (with permission) and transcribed. The study was approved by the University's Human Ethics Committee.

Analysis

Notes were taken immediately after each interview to capture the emotional tones and the key elements as perceived by the interviewer (first author). Interviews were transcribed. Transcriptions, notes and written submissions were subject to a process of constant comparison [24,25] in order to develop themes related to our research question. Themes arose from the data itself. Quotes were linked to themes to assist in defining the boundaries and content of each theme and contradictory evidence to those themes was actively sought to facilitate fairness (authenticity) in the analysis. We then sought connections between themes as described by Dey [26] and connections between the themes and the literature.

Qualitative research can be judged by the concepts of fairness and authenticity. Fairness is evidenced by ensuring participants' voices are heard in the text: that themes are illustrated by a range of quotes identifying diversity as well as commonality. We addressed issues of authenticity in the analysis by an active search for data contradicting each theme. We do not claim our results are representative, or even the experiences of a significant proportion of grandparents. Instead, as appropriate in constructivist research, we present the voices of a particular group of grandparents and identify where experiences are shared and where they are unique.

Results and Discussion

In this section we have presented the data as an evolving story, using the themes we extracted from the data but creating a narrative from them in a manner that we believe authentically represents the grandparents' experiences. We acknowledge that, as in all social contexts, there are a network of factors all influencing outcomes and do not intend to imply a direct casual link between grandparental estrangement from their grandchildren and the outcomes illustrated in the following section. Instead, this paper uses the narratives and told by the grandparents to illustrate how they perceive their situation and the consequences they identify as arising from this situation.

All names used are pseudonyms and we have participants' permission to use quotes.

Self-identity: Grandparent as a parent

Our data has a life-course perspective: the grandparents talked about how their relationships with their children in the past are now impacting on their current reality. The data reflects Ambivalence Theory [10] in these narratives around their relationships with their children. Some grandparents talked about their children's negative judgements of them as parents:

She said: "you've never been a good mother, only when I was little". I said: "now that is ridiculous and you know that is ridiculous". She said: "you be quiet and listen to what I have to say, what I have to tell you now... I never want to see or hear from you the rest of your life"... I said: "I have fought hard. I have provided for both of your children. I've done all that I can to help you and [son-in-law]" (Marion – maternal grandmother).

Such judgements potentially challenge grandparent-as-parent identities and thus may have an impact on self-esteem and ultimately grandparent wellbeing. Threatening identity can be perceived as challenging, and, not unexpectedly, some grandparents were angry and hurt that their child would treat them in this way:

I don't think anybody knows like what the hurt is like to have a child that – you feel that you have done the best for the child all your life, you know ... Suffer pretty badly with depression over [daughter]. I think I must have cried every night for her (Marcey – paternal grandmother).

Despite you being a parent and doing what you consider the right thing in your upbringing and doing the best you could all the time, Sharon [grandmother] and I are just shocked at the hostility [from their son]... if I could describe the early days when all this started happening, it was like an ongoing death (Ron – paternal grandfather).

Our grandparents experienced a reversal of power: as parents they had power over their children, but as grandparents their children (now parents) have the power to control their relationships with their grandchildren:

...she [daughter] said I am telling you, you will do what I tell you, when I tell you, how I tell you or you will not be coming here again and you would never see [granddaughter] again (Marion – maternal grandmother).

Every time it was always on their terms kind of thing. I know they are her children but I don't want to take them away from her (Genevieve – maternal grandmother).

The tension evident in the relationships between the grandparent and parental generations clearly impact on the ability of grandparents to access their grandchildren. Such tension, as identified in Ambivalence

theory [7] is often never resolved as it reflects a shift of power from the grandparent-as-parent to the parental generation who act as gatekeepers to grandparental access to grandchildren. Connidis and McMullin [10] argue that this intergenerational conflict is inevitable and, in fact, normal. Managing this tension is stressful and has a major impact on the wellbeing of all parties. The impact of this tension on the grandparents in this study is explored a little later in this paper.

Self-identity: Grandparent as grandparent

Grandparents felt they were 'failing' grandparenthood because they could not play out the expected grandparent role with these particular grandchildren. The expected roles of grandparents are thought to include 'not interfering' and 'being there', [15]. These roles encompass an inherent conflict given that 'being there' can be difficult to achieve without being seen to interfere. For some of the grandparents in this study this was reflected in a confusion of how to be a grandparent:

... and I guess I'm still trying to find my role in it all and how do I act? What is the healthy way in a normal family of how a grandparent relates to an adult child, you know, to my adult daughter and husband as a separate unit now, and then to the grandchildren (Daisy – maternal grandmother).

Gray and White [27] argue that role confusion is commonly found in a range of professions and in those contexts, it impacts on what is perceived to be necessary to succeed. In the case of some of the grandparents in this study, role confusion appears to leave them uncertain what to do, or how to proceed. This uncertainly contributes to a lack of agency: grandparents appear to feel powerless and unable to think through possible strategies to manage their situation. This feeling of powerlessness functions like a trap: whilst they are feeling powerless they are unable to proactively problem neither solve nor attempt to gain agency.

In addition to role confusion, some of the grandparents expressed concern over the judgement of others: their fear of being seen as 'bad people' because they were not fulfilling what they saw as the 'proper' grandparenting role:

And that's the way that the public see – you must have treated them badly or something terrible to create that situation (Ronald – maternal grandfather).

Well it's devastating for my wife, and especially seeing others have a good relationship with the grandchildren, it affects you (David – paternal grandfather).

A number of the grandparents were concerned about what their grandchildren think of them. They expressed concern that grandchildren are being told untruths about them and that the grandchildren will therefore think of them as 'bad people':

I said I would love to take them to Disneyland as an example ... they [grandchildren] were told we would kidnap them and take them overseas (George – paternal grandfather).

... and the disturbing factor is that he [grandson] has been told a lot of untruth ... You know and they probably think well, the other side don't care, but it wasn't that at all, it's not that we don't care (Terri – paternal grandmother).

For some of the grandparents the disrupted relationships have impacted on other family members:

This issue has caused a major breakdown of our whole family. My

brother and sister have sided with my daughter and have not attempted to create any form of reconciliation or assist us in seeing our grandchildren... (Veronica – maternal grandmother).

The wider family are likely to be important contributors of feedback in relation to the building of one's self-identity [28], and, for the grandparents, when wider family are involved in the conflict, their negative perceptions of themselves as grandparents are reinforced by these key others. This judgement of others (grandchildren and other family and community members) has a significant impact on self-identity. The grandparents felt that not only were they seen as unsuccessful parents (if they were successful then they WOULD have a good relationships with their adult children) but they were also seen as unsuccessful grandparents. This perception impacts on self-identity and self-esteem which developmental theory positions as significant predictors of life outcomes including mental health, physical health and relationships [29]. In addition, perceptions leading to poor self-image are also likely to impact on feelings of grandparent agency. It is well known that the ability to work through problems, and take agency, is related to the ability to recognise and work from strengths rather than from weaknesses [30]. Grandparents who are feeling as if they are 'failures' are thus less likely to feel a sense of agency and this will impact on their ability to manage the situation in which they find themselves.

Agency

Lack of agency is likely to have a considerable impact on self-image as grandparents struggle to define themselves as both parents and grandparents, and lack the power to perform either role in the way they may prefer. In some cases this lack of agency led to a sense of powerlessness which literally paralysed the grandparents: they had no idea what to do to manage their situation.

I know there's nothing we can do. I just feel we've got our hands tied (David – paternal grandfather).

We seem to have no –one on our side to help us and the grief at times is unbearable (Louise – paternal grandmother)

However, some of the grandparents continued to make attempts either to manage the situation, or to find ways to work around it. For some, these attempts at gaining some level of agency focused on maintaining a small degree of contact with their grandchildren:

...but I do want the grandchildren to have some form of support, of what we can give and so every birthday and every Christmas I send them a card ... I put \$50 in their accounts ... so that's building up and I send one to [estranged grandson] every birthday and every Christmas, never had any reply. I never know even he's ever received it but it doesn't matter, because it's going into the bank and he will get it eventually ... and I feel that I am doing something; it's not much (Alec – maternal grandfather).

She [daughter] posts photos on Facebook, so I get to see what she [granddaughter] looks like ... it's more than I've ever had before (Marsha – maternal grandmother).

In trying to gain some level of agency, some of the grandparents were able to call on the support of other family members to help maintain contact with the grandchildren:

...my daughter apparently rang my niece and she said can we meet up ...and they went to my sister's house ... [Marion was able to get up-to-date information about her grandchildren from her niece following this visit] (Marion – maternal grandmother).

So we decided that our son would take the gifts to the children and

he would photograph them opening the presents, so that we could see that the girls loved their gifts ... that went fine, he did that (Neville and Jane – maternal grandparents).

For others, a sense of agency was somewhat facilitated by their ability to take care of themselves and manage the feelings resulting from the estrangement:

I want to get more to a place where I'm not pulled around, tossed around like a ball or something by her [her daughter's] emotions ... I'm learning from my families and friends (Daisy – maternal grandmother).

Gaining a sense of agency, even if this did not resolve the situation entirely as grandparents' may wish, seemed to lead to a sense of acceptance. This is a recognition that, whilst the situation is not ideal, they have done all they can to manage it positively. For some this sense of acceptance is cyclic:

You know you keep coming back ... when it comes to anniversaries or something, you might manage really well, and then you get to a particular anniversary and it hits you again (Richard – paternal grandfather).

Richard describes a situation that reflects the cyclic model of grieving (Kubler-Ross, 1969). This model proposes that grief does not ever go away completely: one learns to manage and move forward, but that anniversaries and other occasions will continue to bring back feelings of grief, albeit somewhat reduced as time passes. In Richard's case, where he had a strong relationship with his grandson which was then severed by the child's parents, the parallel to grieving is clear: Richard is describing his grief at the loss of his grandson.

Impact on grandparents' health and wellbeing

Irrespective of their ability to gain some sense of agency, all the grandparents talked about the impact this estrangement had on them. Some found it difficult to sleep:

Yeah I wake up. I can't get to sleep at night. I seem like hazed... (Corrine-maternal grandmother).

For some there were significant physical health impacts (in this case presumably resulting from an accumulation of stress over a life time but positioned by the interviewee as related to the stress of the estrangement):

It was just too much for me and I became very ill. I had a mild stroke soon after. I became very depressed and didn't want to live ... the hurt didn't go away. It just stayed, a great lump in my heart (Maryann – paternal grandmother).

More frequently, the grandparents spoke about the impact on their mental health. Many of the grandparents used the image of a broken heart:

My heart has been broken so many times (Jessie – maternal grandmother).

We feel devastated and there is not a day goes by that we do not think about our grandchildren. There is nothing we can do it is like a knife in our hearts and we feel we have lost 6 of our family (Louise and Daniel – paternal grandparents).

Anxiety and depression were mentioned in association with a broken heart:

It was so enjoyable and now to think about it brings me to tears ... this breaks our hearts ... the consequence of this is that I have had issues of anxiety and depression, none of which I had previously and now I have

been diagnosed with a severe heart problem, cardiomyopathy ... this is more than I can bear – it breaks my heart to think about them (Veronica – maternal grandmother)

Many talked about significant levels of ongoing distress:

... Yeah it's horrible because I can't move on. I am just stuck and I'm distressed about it (Corrine – maternal grandmother).

It just feels terrible ... I feel angry and bitter and twisted and everything (Jocelyn – paternal grandmother).

Grandparents cried, felt sick and ashamed. For some, feelings of shame led to their inability to go outside the home and face others:

I cried every day. I felt sick. I felt guilty. I felt shame. Even now when I go out, I don't like going out ... Yeah, it's a shame, an embarrassment ... It feels like I'm the only one ... I have chest pain ... It's really taken a toll on me (Marion – maternal grandmother).

I mean I don't go out. I have also got psychological problems because of what's happened ... And I can't be around people. So this is all stemming from what happened with [granddaughter] (Raewyn – maternal grandmother).

Some grandparents acknowledged that their trauma and grief led them to consider self-harm and/or suicide:

I'm seriously thinking now, I've just been told yesterday I have to go back in [to hospital] and have another operation because they got to take the glands, the cancer has spread to the glands and I'm seriously thinking I'm not having the treatment ... I'm not sure I've got the strength to go through it any more, it's really drained me emotionally (Laura – maternal grandmother)

I felt suicidal at one stage but was so lucky to be able to find a very supportive psychologist who was able to help me over many years (Maryann – paternal grandmother).

Lack of agency and poor self-image are both linked to a range of negative outcomes including poor mental and physical health [4,16,17]. The physical and mental health's of the grandparents in this study are clearly impacted by their experiences and this raises concern for their long term wellbeing. Even those grandparents who appeared to have developed some level of agency in managing their estrangement talked about the negative impacts on them, thus it is possible that gaining agency, whilst beneficial, is not in itself sufficient to eliminate all the negative impacts.

Supports

Grandparents were asked what would help to improve the situation in which they found themselves. Some suggested a support group where they could make contact with others who were experiencing similar situations:

... and the only thing that could be helpful is a support group. I'm not terribly much in favour of support groups, but I'm on my own now with my family all pulled back ... so you got the support group and you can actually make friend through that and talk to people about your feelings and their feelings (Jillian – paternal grandmother).

Many of them would like to have access to an independent mediator with whom they could work to try and resolve the difficulties between themselves and their children:

Maybe an independent mediator to explain to all parties that there was a situation here in which the child's interests were at stake (Kevin – paternal grandfather).

Well, I think in my situation, I think that to be able to get mediation on both parts and to be able to find out from these kids about you know, problems that make them really feel that they don't want me to see these kids (Mary – paternal and maternal grandmother).

A number of the grandparents had used some form of counselling with a counsellor / psychologist or psychiatrist to help them manage their own feelings. Alternatively, others got emotional support from friends or family:

I've got a very good GP, but mainly I guess friends (Daisy – maternal grandmother).

I've had a lot of therapy on me own. But I had to ... I've done a terrible lot of work on myself ... (Megan – maternal grandmother).

You just have to pull along together. We're lucky we have got each other (Marion – maternal grandmother).

A number of the grandparents were working their way through the current legal system and were hopeful that something could be worked out, or had already worked their way through the system and had some kind of outcome that was positive to a degree:

Now I have joined a support group which has motivated me to begin the process through the government Family Relationships hotline to enable my grandchildren to see me ... (Maree – maternal grandmother).

I have a court order to see my grandchildren one day a calendar month 9am – 5pm. My time with them is very restricted (Shirley – maternal grandmother).

In contrast, others had tried to use what was available to them in the system with little success:

The department [this grandmother is using a generic term for what was a Family Court ruling enforced by the relevant state department responsible for families and children] let me see her for half an hour. And during that time when they were to leave, the last time, [granddaughter] hung on to me and she's crying and she said "nanny, nanny, nanny, please let me stay. I will be a good girl". ... And that broke my heart. And I said I couldn't do that to her anymore. And I had to stop seeing her... At that time I was so angry with the department ... they absolutely destroyed this beautiful little girl (Raewyn – maternal grandmother).

I felt that the courts have let me down as a parent and a grandparent. They have not allowed my husband nor me any input to solve the problem – the court has acted in a manner that drives a wedge which is difficult to remove once it has got to that stage. It should be mandatory that counselling and conciliation be in place before such drastic and damaging action can be taken (Veronica – maternal grandmother).

We acknowledge, that by the nature of our selection we have a group of grandparents who in the main are not happy with the opportunities available to them to sustain loving relationships with their grandchildren so the experiences we outline here are by no means typical. However, welfare/family support workers are most likely to have contact with families experiencing similar difficulties, as these are the families most likely to reach out for support. It is important to realise that grandparents experiencing limited or no access to their grandchildren are likely to be experiencing a range of powerful and, in some cases, life threatening, and emotions. These grandparents need support to help them manage tensions evident in their lives as they struggle to manage the ambivalence associated with their self-image as parents and their self-image as grandparents. Those of the grandparents in this study who had experienced them, suggested support groups were

useful in this process. Others had experienced formal kinds of therapy. The risk for a number of grandparents is that their negative self-image leads them to self-imposed isolation, which lessens the opportunities they have to build and access informal and formal support networks.

A number of our grandparents also talked about negative impacts on their health and these also need to be managed. The link between physical health and psychosocial stress is well established [31-34] and it is important for those providing physical health care to be aware of potential underpinning psychological stressors.

Recommendations

Offering support groups, and being aware of potential grandparents and ensuring they access these groups, is clearly a role that community/family workers can action. The issues our grandparents raise around the Australian Family Court system, and the availability of mediation/counselling through the Family Relationship Centres (federally funded and available in a number of Australian communities), are more difficult to address. Several of our grandparents had tried mediation through the Family Relationship Centres but this failed to have an impact when the parents (their children) either refused to attend, or failed to carry out actions they had agreed upon. Given attendance at these sessions, and any agreements that arise from them are voluntary, there is no power to enforce them. Whilst our grandparents therefore argued for compulsory attendance and the power to reinforce agreements, there is an extensive and well established literature indicating that mandatory mediation is generally ineffective [35,36]. Clearly then, there is more potential efficacy in prevention. We argue that community/family support workers can facilitate this by actively seeking grandparents who may benefit from support groups, and working with them to engage them in the activities of the group.

However, we also argue that another way in which it is possible to address parental reluctance to engage is to raise community awareness and understanding of the importance of extended family in creating a 'circle of security' [37-40] around children. It is well known in international aid/development programmes that parents often engage with programmes they see as in their child's best interests, when, if it were about themselves, they would not bother. Such a phenomena, we argue, applies equally in countries such as Australia. A public education campaign could function effectively to encourage families to reach out and build extended family networks for the benefit of the children. Geographic proximity of grandparents and grandchildren need not be a major barrier given the National Broadband Network roll-out in Australia which makes it potentially possible for internet interactions (using tools such as Skype), and the high penetration of internet usage across Australia. Our aim is to help create a 'culture' where families are encouraged to have grandparental involvement in the lives of their children (in ways that suit each individual family), and actively seek to maintain this for the benefit of the children.

Limitations and Final Summation

One of the limitations of the study is the small number of grandfathers who participated. The interviewer was aware, in some of the phone interviews, that the grandfather was in the background (although his voice was not recorded nor used in the transcriptions given that he clearly was not willing to come to the phone and speak to the interviewer himself) and there were times when the grandmother being interviewed would talk about themselves as a couple. We speculated that a number of the grandfathers (who grew up and parented in an era where there were stronger gender role stereotypes than are prevalent

today) were less comfortable talking about issues involving relationships and where possible, preferred their wives to speak on these issues. It may be possible to increase the number of grandfather participants in future work by purposively accessing men's groups (such as Men's Sheds – an organisation that provides communities with a facility for men that includes free access to a community workshop space, tools and men's support workers) and using male spokes-people and interviewers.

A second limitation is that this study is positioned around grandparent voice – it does not include the voices of the parents nor the grandchildren. This makes it irrelevant to attempt to verify WHY relationships broke down, or the details of how this occurred. We acknowledge that relationships are complex and there are multiple perspectives involved. However, we aimed to access the grandparents' perspectives and experiences, and explore the ways in which grandparents perceived these to impact on their lives. The study is about grandparental reality, not the reality of other players in these experiences. Other research is needed to investigate the perspectives of other players in these relationships.

Our grandparents address a significant issue in their lives that has a major impact not only on their self-image, but on their long term health and wellbeing. For these grandparents, the experience of having minimal or no contact with their grandchildren is devastating. Given that large numbers of our population are likely to experience grandparenthood it is essential that we are able to develop appropriate support services for those grandparents who are experiencing this trauma, and investigate further what services could be made available to help prevent this trauma from happening in the first place.

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