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What is this thing called Grandparenting?

The social, economic and political influences on the role in New Zealand

A thesis
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Lesley Florence Collington Read

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Abstract

In 2003 Statistics New Zealand was describing grandparenting as an ‘emerging field’. There exists very little academic material on the subject in New Zealand although there is a prolific literature from the US and increasing interest from Britain and other countries in the West. This research study sets out to explore the nature of grandparenting in New Zealand, past and present, reviewing the social, economic and political influences on the role as it is today.

From a review of the international literature three distinct models of grandparenting were identified for enquiry. They are:

- The full-time care grandparent with parental responsibilities.
- The grandparent providing regular supplementary care to assist parent/s to fulfil the parenting needs of their children (e.g. when parents are in work).
- The grandparent with a role characterized as voluntary and varied, outside parent type responsibilities.

Choosing an interpretive approach, I used a case study method of research. Eighteen grandparents were interviewed, some from each model. Additionally six grandparents, two from each model, kept a diary of their grandparenting activity over three months. Grandparents were purposefully selected to represent wide variability.

From grandparents in all three grandparenting models there is evidence of a strong emotional commitment to adult children’s families. From past relationship with grandparents, or less often from observing their parents grandparenting their children, the grandparents have learnt a model of grandparenting which is carried into the present. There it is typically expressed in a variety of nurturing and protective behaviours. In this manner grandparents have the potential to provide continuity, stability and a sense of belonging at the micro-social level of the family, and in doing so, at the macro-level, to the broader fabric of society.

When, from social and/or economic circumstance grandparents are parenting grandchildren, they are likely to suffer a deteriorating quality of life, with health and finances especially affected. Grandparents who are providing regular, supplementary care of grandchildren also sometimes experience these effects. Social policies sensitive to both the micro- and macro-social value of grandparents are needed to address their vulnerabilities.
Acknowledgements

My primary gratitude for getting to this point in my research on New Zealand grandparenting is split between what I owe the grandparent participants in the study and what I owe my supervisors. Perhaps I should add a ‘third way’ in appreciation of the fascinating topic I was fortunate to choose to study.

The fascination of grandparenting has lain somewhat with the richness of the data given me by the grandparents I interviewed and the diary contents of those grandparents who, with such commitment, wrote down their thoughts and feelings of being a grandparent. These grandparents gave me wise and beautiful thoughts expressed in feelingful and colourful words. I hope so much I have done justice to them in my interpretations of their words.

My supervisors gave me direction and encouragement without which I would not have held onto the faith to work on. Life and the world do not stop for a PhD and sometimes both have impinged uncomfortably into my efforts to complete this study. Dr Celia Briar was with me at the beginning and gave me valuable help in finding my way through the related literature and theories on grandparenting. Dr Mary Nash was with me all the way. I believe she, with me, did not at first foresee how long we would take. I am deeply grateful for how she ‘hung in’ with me. I have been fortunate to have the time, knowledge and experience of Associate Professor Mike O’Brien, who joined Dr Nash to guide me through the latter part of this thesis.

I began this study with the thought that it would always take second place to my obligations to my family. There has been much correspondence between my study of grandparenting and my life as wife, mother and grandmother. I do want now to recognize my family, for their support and tolerance of my time and interest in thesis composing, which has taken time and interest away from them; also for their sometimes practical support in reading and commenting on the writing.

Special thanks should go to Ainsley Mahoney and Katja Bulic with whom I was able to share early collegial conversations on studying grandparenting in New Zealand.
A final acknowledgement is owed to friends: to Keith who has supported the work, and to Judith who, so usefully, put me in touch with some of my participants. This goes also to Takapuna Grammar School for the friends it has provided me with, over nearly sixty years, to keep going on.

Below is a drawing by my then four-year-old grandson, of his ‘family’. He is at the top right. I am the one with a lot of hair, with his younger brother, at the bottom left. My husband is above, with no hair and glasses. Olwyn’s other grandparents, whom he had met, live in London.
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