

SOCIAL CHANGE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE GRANDPARENT ROLE OF CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN GRANDPARENTS

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Many of the social changes of the 20th century have had a significant impact on the traditional roles of grandparenting. These social changes include the feminist movement of the seventies, advances in medical and communication technologies, changes to the traditional family structure, modern divorce laws, the increase in drug and alcohol abuse, as well as an increase in child abuse and neglect. This paper arises out of a study that explored the impact these key social changes have had on the grandparent role of contemporary Australian grandparents. The paper discusses findings from interviews conducted with grandparents who reside in northern New South Wales. The findings have relevance to development of policies relating to childcare, grandparents raising grandchildren and divorce law reform. Conclusions are drawn about further research needed into the impact of social changes on the grandparent role of contemporary Australian grandparents.

Introduction

Old stereotypes no longer apply to today's grandparents. Contemporary grandparents are a significant source of help for their families, such as providing child-care, financial and moral support. Increased longevity has changed the face of grandparenthood and grandparents today now range in age from their early 30's to 100 plus years. This paper evolved from a study that sought to explore how the role of contemporary Australian grandparents has been influenced by a number of social changes, which occurred in the 20th century. An analysis of the literature identified key social changes which included: the second wave feminist movement, more diverse family structures, modern divorce laws, drug abuse, the gay liberation movement, child abuse, and advances in medical and communication technologies. Conclusions drawn from the study's findings have implications for policy makers and indicate that further research is required into grandparenting within Australia.

Literature

The **feminist movement** of the 1970's played its part in challenging a notion of the traditional Australian family. There was increased entry into the workforce by mothers with young children, resulting in grandparents being called upon more often to take on the childcare role (Edgar, 2000; Aspin, 1994). Many more grandmothers, themselves, are participating in paid employment, which raises the issue of how much time and energy these working grandmothers are able to devote to a grandparenting role (Millward, 1996). Some contemporary grandmothers appear to be experiencing the "double burden" of

participating in paid employment as well as providing assistance with the care of their grandchildren.

Family structure has become more diverse, notably over the last thirty years. This diversity manifests as de facto relationships, sole parent families, blended families, step families and extended families. It is reported that these changes to the structural relationships within Australian families can often prove difficult for grandparents, who may feel unsure of their roles and position (Gonski, 1994.).

Divorce rates soared after the introduction of the no-fault Family Law Act in 1975. For grandparents the effects of divorce are either positive or negative (Aspin, 1994). The amounts of contact and access grandparents have with their grandchildren after their own child's divorce, appears to be strongly influenced by the geographical location of, and the level of amicability between, the grandchild's parents. Maternal grandparents may develop a closer relationship with their grandchildren, while paternal grandparents may be denied access to their grandchildren.

Advances in **medical technology and health** have contributed to the increased life expectancy of Australian men and women (Weeks & Quinn, 2000; Aspin, 1994) whereby “some people will now be grandparents for more than half their lifetime” (Kornhaber, 1996, p.10). Overall, contemporary grandparents are assumed to be more active and healthier than their own grandparents, with time and energy to devote to their interests, including their grandchildren (Gonski, 1994).

The consequences of the **drug problem** over the past 30 years have been severe for a number of Australian families. In particular, it has had a marked effect on the lives of many Australian grandparents, who are now raising their grandchildren because of their own children's inability to do so (Horin, 1998). These grandparents have had their lives turned upside down and often find themselves socially isolated due to their now different lifestyle. In this event, it has been reported that they often find it hard to cope with the daily demands and the financial provision of their grandchildren (Szechtman, 1999).

There is conjecture in the literature about whether 20th century Australia has witnessed an escalation of **child abuse** (O'Neill, 1994), or whether this increase has been an outcome of a changed legal responsibility to report suspected cases (Aspin, 1994). This increase in reported child abuse has added another dimension to the grandparenting role. Research by Kornhaber (1996) has shown that when children have been abused, they often turn to their grandparents for help. Additionally, if child abuse results in grandparents becoming the custodians of their grandchildren, then parent-grandparent conflict can arise.

The **gay liberation movement** since the 1970's has also challenged traditional notions about family (Gilding, 2001). Over the last thirty years there has been a reported increase in the number of permanent homosexual relationships (Hamilton & Ferry, 1997) as well as an increased number of same sex couples who are raising children (Saunders, 2001). An empirical study conducted by Kornhaber (1996) concluded that such 'non-traditional'

family arrangements could lead to confusion about grandparent identity and roles. Grandparents with grandchildren born into gay or lesbian relationships appear to worry about social stigma hurting their grandchildren or about the psychological health of a grandchild raised with parents of the same gender. Another concern is that grandparents, who have privately accepted their own child's sexual orientation, may be threatened by how public a grandchild is likely to become, and that if they mention their grandchild, they will be asked seemingly embarrassing questions (Martin, 1993).

The 20th century has witnessed an **information revolution**, which has changed the way we live and work, with face to face encounters between people being displaced by electronic interactions (Mackay, 2002). Advances in communication technology have resulted in Australian seniors being encouraged to use the Internet as a means of communicating with their grandchildren (Jongen, 2000). However, grandparents can find this technology challenging and may sometimes find it difficult to live up to their grandchildren's expectations in this area (Levi, 1999).

Methodology

Australian grandparents were purposely recruited to participate in this research study through a story about the study printed in *The Northern Star* newspaper and an interview conducted with one of the researchers on ABC radio. Sixteen grandparents were recruited from within the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales (NSW), of whom 13 were grandmothers and three were grandfathers, ranging from early 30 to late 70 years of age. All of these participants were heterosexual. Eight were retired, two were in full-time paid work, four were in part-time paid work, two were raising their grandchildren on a full-time basis and one was raising a grandchild on a part-time basis.

In-depth interviews were conducted with the 16 participants, each averaging between 60 to 90 minutes in time. Separate interviews were conducted with each grandparent, except in two cases where married grandparents were interviewed together. The interviews were held in either the participants' homes or in local coffee shops. All participants gave their permission for the interviews to be audio- taped.

Findings

The findings from the study indicate that one or more of the social changes of the 20th century have impacted on the grandparent role of contemporary Australian grandparents.

The **feminist movement**, with a resultant increase in the number of mothers with young children entering the workforce, has impacted on the role of grandparents in terms of provision of childcare. Three of the grandmothers interviewed perceived childcare as part of their grandparenting role and were amenable to do this, even though at times it was difficult for them. However, the majority of grandparents interviewed did not agree with grandparents taking on a childcare role, except in the case of an emergency.

Those grandparents who had been exposed to their children's de-facto relationships and single parenting took these **changes in family structure** in their stride, and undertook a caring and nurturing grandparent role. This caring grandparent role was also extended to step-grandchildren. All of the grandparents, who had step-grandchildren due to either their own or their children's re-partnering, reported that these step-grandchildren were treated the same as their blood grandchildren.

Two paternal grandparents who had been denied access to their grandchild due to their son's **divorce**, still tried to maintain a caring grandparent role. They were attempting to keep in touch with their grandchild, mainly through cards sent via their son, and were considering legal action to gain more access to their grandson.

Most of the grandparents who participated in the study believed that they were able to play a more active grandparent role because of their high level of **health** and fitness and they perceived that because of increased life expectancy, it was likely that they would become great-grandparents.

Those grandparents whose children suffer from **drug addiction** described their feelings of sadness when told they were to become grandparents, knowing that their children may not be able to care for the future grandchild. Nevertheless, all of these grandparents chose to sacrifice a significant part of their lives and take on either the full-time or part-time care of their grandchildren.

One of the study's participants had felt the impact of **child abuse** on her grandson and was seeking professional help for him.

One grandparent couple, whose daughter was in a **lesbian relationship** and conceived a child through artificial insemination, had fully accepted the way their grandson had been brought into the world. The grandfather within this couple believed that an important part of his grandparent role was to act as a role model to his grandson, which the researchers acknowledge to be a contestable stance.

Most of the grandparents interviewed had grandchildren who were still too young to **communicate with via the Internet**, but these grandparents believed that they would use e-mail in the future as means to further bond with their grandchildren. However, three grandparents perceived email too impersonal and preferred to use the telephone and to write letters.

Limitations

Due to the small sample size, the study's findings cannot be considered as representative of Australian grandparents, but is representative of the experiences of grandparents resident in the Northern Rivers region of NSW. Only heterosexual grandparents were included in the study, despite a number of attempts to recruit homosexual grandparents. No indigenous grandparents expressed their willingness to take part in the study. More

grandmothers than grandfathers were prepared to talk about their grandparenting role, which resulted in a gender ratio of 13 grandmothers to three grandfathers.

Conclusions and recommendations

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this study. First, one or more social changes of the 20th century have made a significant impact on the grandparent role of contemporary grandparents within the Northern Rivers region of NSW, and this supports the literature.

Second, the findings of this study have relevance to the development of childcare policy in Australia. It is apparent from this study that many grandparents are reluctant to take on a childcare role, which further supports the continual push for more government-supported childcare places to be made available, particularly for the children of working parents.

Third, the study also revealed that grandparents who raise their grandchildren receive limited government support, which suggests this aspect of government policy needs to be addressed.

Fourth, the study found that limited legal, emotional and moral support is available to paternal grandparents who are estranged from their grandchildren as a result of their own children's divorce. It indicates that further reforms may be needed in the area of family law and divorce. This could include financially assisted legal help for grandparents who are seeking to maintain contact with and access to their grandchildren, as well as an extension of the Grandparent Support Group to include regional areas of Australia.

Finally, it appears that little research has been undertaken within Australia into the role of grandparents and how social changes have impacted on their grandparenting role. An outcome of this study is to recommend that further research be carried out within Australia in the following areas:

- the impact of drug abuse on the grandparenting role;
- grandparents who are raising their grandchildren;
- the impact of divorce on paternal grandparents;
- grandparents as role models in the lives of grandchildren born to gay and lesbian parents.

Research into these areas may be of interest to policy makers, aged services agencies and grandparent advocacy groups.

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