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What is this thing called Grandparenting?

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

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfilment of
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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.

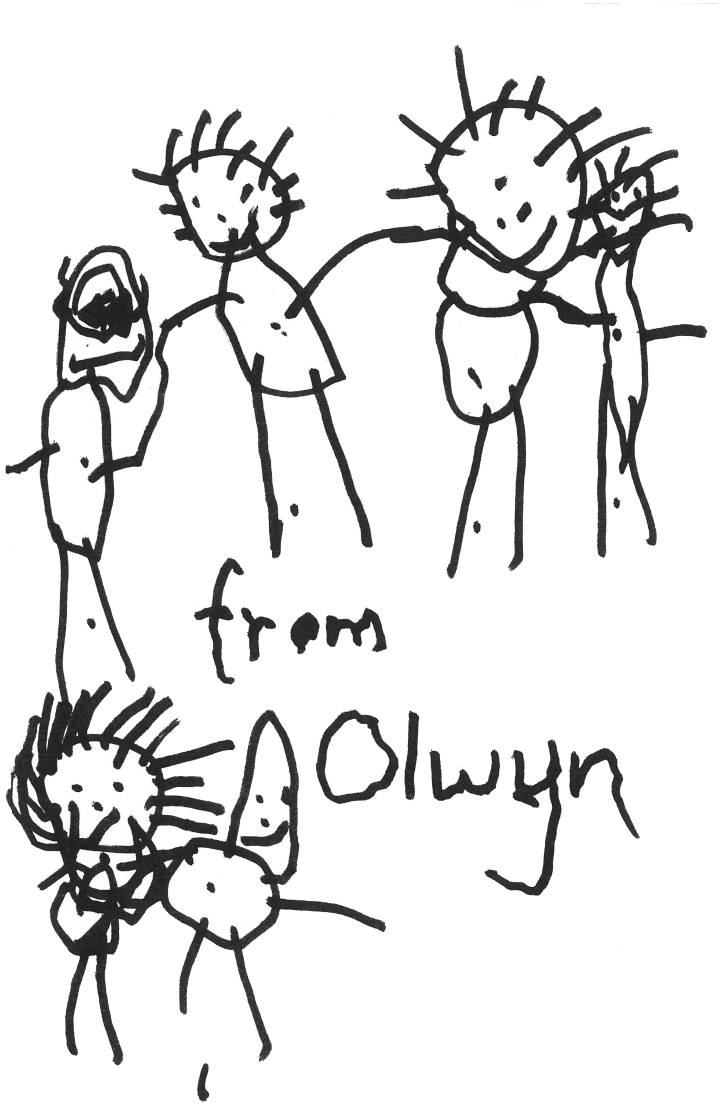

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION	**1**
Before Beginning	**1**
Explaining 'grandparenting'	**1**
The place of Māori in a Pākehā study	**1**
Issues about Grandparenting	**2**
Early observation	**2**
Parenting grandparents again	**2**
The CYP&F Act 1989	**2**
Difficulties arising from a FGC	**3**
A rising grandparent awareness	**4**
Grandparents as carers to their grandchildren	**4**
Clarifying the Study	**4**
Sorting my interests	**4**
About purpose	**5**
Features of New Zealand families	**5**
Choosing a pathway	**6**
Other Research Directions	**7**
Following Chapters	**8**
Chapter II: Methodology	**8**
Chapter III: Grandparents in New Zealand's History	**8**
Chapter IV: The 'grandmotherly' State	**8**
Chapter V: Approaches and Attitudes to Grandparenting	**9**
Chapter VI: Writing About New Zealand Grandparents	**9**
Chapter VII: Three Pictures Illustrating Qualities in Grandparenting	**10**
Chapter VIII: Presentation of Data	**10**
Chapter IX: Discussion of the Data	**10**
Chapter X: Conclusions and Recommendations	**11**
CHAPTER II: METHODOLOGY	**12**
Introduction	**12**

Methodological Assumptions Underlying the Research Method 12
Case Study as Method 14
The nature of the study 14
Choice of the case study method 14
What, how and whys? 15
Shaping and thinking the design from observation and experience 15
Shaping and thinking the design from literature and theory 16
Units of analysis 16
Triangulating data 17
Focus on Data Finding 18
'…a little like starting on a journey' 18
Weighing the focus group interview with the individual in-depth interview 18
Thinking about Data Collection 19
Control and logistics 19
Solicited diary records as research data 20
Here and now – place and time 20
A question of questions 20
The grandparent/grandchild dyad 21
The pilot study 22
Pilot study outcomes 23
Pilot study ethics 24
The Interview Schedule 24
Sequencing 24
Managing emotion 25
More specifically about questions 25
Selecting a purposive sample 27
Sample size and nature 27
Making Contact 28
Accessing participants using a national network 28
Accessing participants locally 28
Exchanging research information with possible participants 29
Selecting out: researcher choice 29
Selecting out: grandparent choice 29
Getting to know the people 30

More about recruitment **31**
Winkling the missing grandparents **31**
Features of the Data Collection **32**
Changeability in the family snap shots **32**
More about diarists and diary keeping **33**
Using email **33**
Features of the diary method **34**
Doing diaries **34**
The therapeutic value of qualitative research **35**
Life stage **36**
Shaping the Interviewer/Interviewee Relationship **36**
Ethical relevancy **36**
'*The social relationships we have with those we interview*' **37**
Power and accountability **38**
About boundary awareness **40**
Anonymity and confidentiality **40**
Difference and Representativeness **42**
Ethnic sensitivity and Māori participants **42**
'*the need for taking gender seriously*' **43**
Moving On **44**
Ordering the chaos **44**
Looking beyond my own perceptions **44**
Limitations to the diversity of the grandparent sample **45**
Summary and conclusions **46**

CHAPTER III: GRANDPARENTS IN NEW ZEALAND'S HISTORY **47**
Introduction **47**
A migrant destination **47**
Pre- and Early-contact Māori **47**
Reconstructing a past **47**
The social fabric of Māori pre European-contact **48**
Pākehā Settlement from 1840-1900 **49**
The early European experience **49**
Early settler characteristics **50**

The young society 51
The new society 52
Addressing misfortune: a family affair 53
In default of family: charitable aid 54
An aging population 54
Grandparenting in Early Pākehā Settlement 55
Personal record keeping 55
A very male correspondence: three generations of closeness 55
Establishing a Victorian extended family in settler NZ: wife and husband 56
Gender, class and personal writing 57
Recording a working class life from grandchild to grandparent 58
Summary and conclusions 59

CHAPTER IV: THE 'GRANDMOTHERLY' STATE 61
Introduction 61
A Little, Careful, State Intervention 61
A focus on change 61
Recapping Māori and the forces of change 62
Māori in recovery 62
Pākehā: the forces for social change 63
Was it 'grandmotherly'? 63
Mary Lee again: living the changes 65
Demography, Families and Grandparents 65
Dredging for grandparents 65
A changing Pākehā demography 66
The colonial heritage as a determinant of family structure 68
Local factors determining family structure 68
Intimacy-at-a-distance: grandparent/grandchild closeness 70
Commonality and diversity in family structure 70
Whānau stories into the twentieth century 71
Grandparenting as common ground? 72
Grandparent Roles in a Mixed Economy of Childcare 73
Who looks after the children? 73
The Interface of institutional and grandparent care 74

Opening the orphanage window onto grandparenting 74
A study of orphanage experience 75
Grandparent and grandchild contact drawn from Crawford's study 75
Safety net or second line of defence? 76
Grandparenting 'the flotsam of society' 77
Saint Mary's Orphanage Register 78
Limitations of Registry evidence 79
Government and Professionals Move In On Family 80
Attention on home life 80
Shaping family through financial legislation 81
Securing the welfare state 82
Families with children 83
Changes for Māori 84
Change: Values, Relationships, Families, Work 85
Families and ex-nuptial birth 85
A mutating in family life 86
Changes in workforce participation 88
Changes for women 88
Family Solutions to Family Problems 89
Rethinking family welfare 89
Precursors to the CYP&F Act 1989 89
Cultural factors shaping the CYP&F Act 1989 90
Economic factors shaping the CYP&F Act 1989 91
Philosophical considerations shaping the CYP&F Act 1989 92
Grandparents and CYP&F Act 1989 93
Grandparent caregiving and working parents 93
Summary and conclusions 94

CHAPTER V: APPROACHES AND ATTITUDES TO GRANDPARENTING 97
Introduction 97
General Characteristics of Grandparenting Studies 98
FIRST GENERATION STUDIES OF GRANDPARENTING: UP TO 1980
Psychoanalytic Theory and Grandparenting 99

Introduction 99
Ernest Rappaport 99
Ernest Jones 100
Helene Deutsch 100
The psychoanalytic interpretation brought forward 101
The Psychoanalytic Legacy: Attachment Theory 102
The making of affectional bonds 102
The care-giving behavioural system 102
Beyond the mother/child dyad 103
The Psychoanalytic Legacy: Life Cycle Theory 104
Erikson 104
The 'epigenetic' life-cycle 105
Grandparents and 'generativity' 105
Play 106
Integration, identification and separation 106
Sociological Studies of Grandparenting 107
London studies: Townsend and Young and Willmott 107
A glimpse at great-grandparents 108
Typing grandparents: Neugarten and Weinstein 108
Grandparents as older persons: Kahana and Kahana 109
SECOND GENERATION STUDIES: AFTER 1980
Expanding Interests in Grandparenting 111
A changing context to grandparenting 111
In praise of grandparents: Kornhaber and Woodward 111
Changing features of grandparenting: Cherlin and Furstenberg 112
Bringing together disciplinary approaches to grandparenthood: The National Conference on Grandparenting and Family Connections 114
Role features of grandparenting 114
Distinctions between parenting and grandparenting 115
Grandparenting, demographics and divorce 115
Grandparents as parents: Minkler and Roe 116
Grandmothers when mothers are unable to mother 116
Support systems 117
Personal and public responsibilities across generations 117

The working of kinship bonds **118**
Reciprocity and balance in kin relationships **119**
Factors in negotiating kin-care **119**
Morality in family exchange **120**
Kin-care/state care balance **120**
Intergenerational solidarity across generation: what holds families together? **120**
Conflict and ambivalence **121**
Measures of solidarity **121**
PROMINENT THEMES IN THE GRANDPARENTING LITERATURE
Introduction **122**
Learning to Grandparent **122**
How does it happen? **122**
The grandparent heritage **123**
A grandparent or a parent template? **124**
Nearest and Dearest **125**
Proximity **125**
The case for attachment at a distance **128**
Class and Grandparenting **127**
Class and family visiting **127**
More on class and grandparenting **127**
Health and Grandparenting **128**
Grandparenting and mental health **128**
Grandparents, health, and grandchildren **129**
Custodial grandparenting and health **130**
Taking care of oneself **130**
Health costs and custodial care **131**
Custodial grandparenting, age and health **132**
Health and supplementary childcare: when you can't be sick **132**
Practice and policy responses **133**
Gender and grandparenting **133**
A matrilineal tilt? **133**
Limitations to gender studies **134**
How gender happens **134**
Gender or lineage bias? **135**

Gender and grandparent childcare **136**
What happens in divorce? **136**
Gender and affinal links **137**
But are they different? **137**
Lost grandparenthood **138**
Summary and conclusions **138**

CHAPTER VI: NEW ZEALAND WRITING ABOUT GRANDPARENTS **142**
Introduction **142**
Intimations of Grandparents **142**
Almost invisible **142**
Grandparents revealed in private lives **143**
New Zealand's Academic Interest in Grandparenting **145**
Introduction **145**
Social Aging and Grandparenting **145**
Ethnic variation in urban grandmotherhood **145**
Grandmotherhood for New Zealand Māori and European women compared **146**
'Old-old' grandparents in rural/urban New Zealand **147**
People in places **148**
Grandparents in rural families **148**
Graduate theses on Grandparenting **149**
Introduction **149**
A qualitative study **149**
'What is a grandparent? **149**
Negotiating grandparenting **150**
Present and past grandparenting **150**
A positivist study **151**
Effects of proximity **151**
Grandparents and parents **152**
Gender factors **152**
'Grandfathers: their changing family roles and contributions' **153**
The study **153**
Grandfatherhood in academic literature **153**
Finding out how grandfathers feel **154**

How to become a grandfather **154**
Belonging and Participating **155**
Grandparenting in the family life of 'Older Adults' **155**
Linked lives and independent living **155**
The value of grandparents **155**
Distance and intergenerational relationships **156**
Grandparenting as part of social connectedness **156**
Place of residence and family closeness **156**
To interfere or not to interfere **157**
The kuia 'Nanny' and fictive grandparenting **158**
The New Zealand extended family **159**
The study **159**
Characteristics of the extended family **159**
Management of childcare **160**
Choice, duty and coercion **161**
Research and policy **161**
Childcare: Grandparents as Parents and the CYP&F Act, 1989 **162**
Introduction **162**
A partnership for kinship care: Worrall and GRG **162**
Changed lives, unattained dreams **163**
Negotiating kinship care and other relationships **164**
Working with the 'authorities' **164**
A survey of 'GRG' grandparents **165**
Some good things **166**
Popular Writing about Grandparents **166**
Autobiographical essays **166**
Media cover **168**
Summary and conclusions **168**

CHAPTER VII: PICTURES **171**
Introduction **171**
Cultural Imprinting **171**
A 'legacy to posterity' **173**
'Grandparents at the door' **174**

CHAPTER VIII: PRESENTATION OF DATA **175**
Chapter Structure **175**
THE PARTICIPANTS **175**
Introduction **175**
Voluntary, Varied Care Grandparents **176**
Regular, Supplementary Care Grandparents **178**
Full-time Care Parenting Grandparents **181**
Limitations to Study Sample **185**
PART I: 'TELLING'MEMORIES THAT INFLUENCED **186**
Introduction to Participants' Stories **186**
Lessons from Grandparents as Grandparents **186**
Mary **186**
Helen **188**
Hetty **189**
Alice **190**
Ann **191**
The four grandfather participants **192**
Clark **192**
Galodali **193**
Sandy **194**
Jack **195**
Violet **196**
Hine **197**
Annie **199**
Lessons from Parents as Grandparents: Parents who Confirm the Lessons from Grandparents **202**
Mary's parents and her husband Tom's parents **202**
Hetty's mother **202**
Alice's mother **202**
Ann's mother **203**
Clark's mother **203**
Sandy's parents and his wife's parents **204**
Jack's parents and his wife's parents **204**

Hine's parents **205**

When Parents have Provided the Grandparenting Model **205**

Ruby **205**

Carol **207**

Briar **207**

Rose **208**

Flora **209**

Pansy **211**

Joy **211**

Dorothy **212**

Resa **213**

PART II: GRANDPARENTS TALKING AND WRITING ABOUT THEIR GRANDPARENTING **215**

Table Showing Number/s of Grandchildren (and Children) **Per Grandparent According to Grandparenting Category** **215**

'Voluntary and Varied' Grandparents **216**

Mary's grandparenting **216**

Hetty's grandparenting **219**

Ruby's grandparenting **221**

Clark's grandparenting **223**

Galodali's grandparenting **226**

Hine's grandparenting **228**

Flora's grandparenting **230**

Joy's grandparenting **233**

Grandparents Providing Regular Supplementary Care **234**

Helen's grandparenting **234**

Ann's grandparenting **235**

Judith's grandparenting **238**

Sandy's grandparenting **240**

Violet's grandparenting **242**

Jack's grandparenting **243**

Dorothy's grandparenting **245**

Victoria's grandparenting **248**

Grandparents with Full-care Parental Responsibilities 249
Alice's grandparenting 249
Carol's grandparenting 252
Flossie's grandparenting 254
Briar's grandparenting 256
Rose's grandparenting 260
Annie's grandparenting 262
Pansy's grandparenting 266
Resa's grandparenting 269

CHAPTER IX: DISCUSSION OF DATA 272
Introduction 272
Grandparents as Grandparents 272
Grandchildren with grandparents: doing together Specials 273
Links to theory 274
Putting lessons into practice 274
How significance happened 275
More about the three-generation households 276
Sickness, age and grandparents 277
Death and absence 278
Tokens of continuity 279
Gatekeepers 279
Parents as Grandparents 280
Observer learning 280
Grandparents as parent help 280
Parents being grandparents 281
Grandparents being Grandparents 282
The 'amoeboid' grandparent 282
The protective being 283
Reflecting data back to theory 284
Responsibility 285
The 'other family' 285
Crossing cultures: separate parents 287

Crossing cultures: intact families 288
Sharing 288
Lineal difference 289
Sample grandfathers 290
Gendered grandparenting 291
Self schedule/child schedule 292
Freedom to grandparent 293
Giving and getting 293
About boundaries 295
Work-life balance 296
Fun 298
Touch 298
Conventions 299
Summary 300

CHAPTER X: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 302
Introduction 302
Findings Common Across Grandparenting Categories 303
Difficulties Arising For Grandparents Who Care For Grandchildren 304
Grandparents At Times Of Change 307
Recommendations to Address The Needs of Caring for Grandchildren 309
Where to Now? 312
Recommendations for Future Research 313

APPENDICES 314

DATA FROM QUESTIONNAIRES:

Grandparents with voluntary and varied responsibilities 315 316
Grandparents providing regular supplementary care to assist parents 317 318
Full-time care grandparents with parental responsiblities 319 320

COMMUNICATIONS WITH PARTICIPANTS:

Initial advertisement **321**
Initial letter **322**
Information sheet **323**
Questionnaire **325**
Consent form (to all participants) **327**
Diary keeping (information giving) **328**
Diarist's letter (voluntary and variable) **329**
Diarist's letter (supplementary, regular care) **330**
Diarist's letter (full-time, parental care) **331**
Diarists consent form **332**
Interview schedule **333**
Additional questions (supplementary regular care, and for full-time care) **335**
Second advertisement **336**
Letter to return abstracts **337**
Letter sharing profiles for confirmation **338**

Bibliography **339**