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Grandparents raising grandchildren: Negotiating the complexities of role-identity conflict

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the experience of grandparents who are raising their grandchildren in NSW, Australia. In-depth interviews were conducted with 34 grandparents and their narratives transcribed and studied using paradigmatic analysis (Polkinghorne 1995) to reveal common themes among the stories told. Identity theory further informed the discussion of these findings. Woven throughout the grandparent narratives is a story of paradox – of experience simultaneously made up of pain/pleasure, myth/reality, inclusion/exclusion, being deserving/undeserving, visible/invisible and voiced/silenced. The findings signal a significant role-identity conflict for grandparents who are parenting grandchildren. This study points to the need for policy and practice that more closely reflects the complexity of experience associated with the grandparent-as-parent role.

Key Words: Grandparents-as-parents, grandchildren, identity theory, narrative inquiry, role-identity conflict.

Background

In many Western societies, grandparenthood has traditionally been associated with a ‘peripheral role’, assisting parents, but not taking on the responsibility for actual child rearing (Cox 2000). Such a role has also been construed as being one of ‘pleasure without

responsibility' (Neugarten & Weinstein 1964, p. 31) such that even when grandparents play an active role within the family, it is considered they should not 'interfere' in the lives of their grandchildren (Clarke & Roberts 2004, p. 191). However, research in recent years has revealed an increasing number of grandparents are moving from such traditional notions of their place in family life into roles typically assumed by the grandchild's parents (Ochiltree 2006). Some contemporary grandparents may not only be routinely providing full-time childcare for pre-school grandchildren (Goodfellow & Lavery 2003), but others, like the grandparents who are the focus of this study, may be undertaking the full-time parenting role of grandchildren (Fitzpatrick 2004). Such developments are congruent with Giddens's (2006) notion of the 'de-traditionalisation' of the family.

This phenomenon is not new in that grandparents in many Western contexts have featured strongly in the lives of their grandchildren, including as full-time carer during times of family crisis, whilst in some other cultures, it is normal practice for grandparents to play a major and continuing role in the raising of grandchildren (Kornhaber 1996). However, what is new is the emergence, both in Australia and overseas, of a new family type, the grandparent-headed family, largely attributed to changing social conditions over the past 25 years (Cox 2000; Richards 2001; Fitzpatrick 2004; Worrall 2005). In the USA between 2.3 and 2.4 million grandparents have primary responsibility for the care and upbringing of 4.5 million children (Hayslip & Patrick 2003). The 2001 New Zealand

Census recorded over 4,000 children being parented by their grandparents, however these figures are now estimated to be much higher (Worrall 2005). The picture in the United Kingdom is no different with approximately 100,000 children under the age of 13 living with a grandparent (Richards & Tapsfield 2003). In Australia, results from questions included in the 2003 Family Characteristics Survey estimated that 22,500 Australian grandparents were raising 31,100 grandchildren aged between 0 to 17 years, with the state of New South Wales (NSW) recording the largest number of grandparent-headed families raising approximately 10,000 children (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004). The key issues underlying this worldwide shift in primary care arrangements are predominantly related to parental drug and alcohol abuse, incarceration, mental health problems, HIV/AIDS, child abuse and neglect, as well as the trend by welfare authorities towards placing children at risk into kinship care rather than foster care (Joslin 2000; Smith *et al.* 2000; Mason *et al.* 2002; Patton 2004; Worrall 2006; Baldock 2007).

The challenges facing grandparents who are raising their grandchildren have been the subject of much research. Financial problems have been widely documented, with many grandparent caregivers living below the poverty line (Fuller-Thomson *et al.* 2000; Smith *et al.* 2000). Grandparents' physical and emotional health problems have also been frequently reported in both Australian and international studies, and include exhaustion, high levels of stress, anxiety and depression (Minkler *et al.* 2000; Sands & Goldberg-Glen 2000; Dunne & Kettler 2006). Legal problems involving custody issues feature strongly, often exacerbated by the high costs involved in legal action (Kelley *et al.* 2001;

Fitzpatrick 2004). Housing and accommodation difficulties have also been identified as a concern, particularly if retired grandparents have moved out of the family home into smaller accommodation unsuitable for a growing family (Fuller-Thomson & Minkler 2003; Worrall 2005). Social isolation and inadequate support, too, have been frequently cited as significant problems for grandparents raising grandchildren, as well as the stress of parenting a new generation of children whose cultural norms and values have greatly changed (Minkler 1999; Fitzpatrick 2004). Added to such realities, for many grandparents, are the demands of caring for children who may have significant behavioural challenges as a result of their exposure to family trauma, abuse or neglect (Musil *et al.* 2000; Richards 2001; Fitzpatrick 2004).

Whilst such difficulties have been well documented, so too have been the reported benefits and positive outcomes. Grandparents in both Australian and overseas studies have reported that parenting grandchildren is a rewarding experience, bringing joy into their lives and keeping them active, as well as giving them a second chance at parenting, a sense of pride and accomplishment and a new lease on life (Minkler & Roe 1993; Fitzpatrick 2004; Dunne & Kettler 2007). The existing evidence also suggests that being placed into the care of relatives or kin can also have significant benefits for the children (Crumbley & Little 1997; Hislop *et al.* 2004). These include feelings of safety, security and stability, as well as being able to maintain contact with their parents, siblings and other extended family members.

Many of the studies cited above have been descriptive in nature, documenting the reasons why grandparents are raising their grandchildren, as well as the benefits and challenges of the grandparent caregiver role. Even though some of these studies have included a focus on the transition from ‘traditional’ grandparent to primary caregiver, there remained an evident need for further research to uncover the deeper meanings grandparents ascribe to the grandparent-as-parent role, as well as the impact of this ‘non-traditional’ role on the identity of grandparents. Such a study would be significant in focusing more attention on the experience of these grandparents since, despite strong media interest in recent years (Gardner 2006; O’Dwyer 2006), grandparents raising their grandchildren remain largely ‘hidden’ within many communities. Additionally, no previous research of this kind had been located within New South Wales, a jurisdiction that has been under some considerable scrutiny in recent years in relation to policy support for children in out-of-home care. In developing such a study, two overarching research questions were formulated:

1. What meanings do grandparents attach to their experiences of carrying out the grandparent-as-parent role?
2. How has the identity of grandparents-as-parents been influenced by assuming the non-traditional grandparent role?

Details of the Study and Participants

Since a major interest of this study was on *understanding* grandparent experiences, a qualitative methodology based on narrative inquiry was chosen, as it allows the researcher to ‘access the personal experiences of the storyteller who frames, articulates and reveals life as experienced in a narrative structure we call story’ (Kramp 2004, p. 105). Far from denoting any sense of fiction, ‘story’ is used in this research to signify ‘narratives that combine a succession of incidents into a unified episode’ (Polkinghorne 1995, p. 7). Hence this research, as a form of narrative inquiry, involved a joint storying and re-storying process aimed at capturing the ‘lived and told’ experiences of grandparents as they engaged in the parenting of their grandchildren (Clandinin & Connelly 2000, p. 46). According to Kramp (2004) narrative inquiry has the power and the potential to allow the voices of the storytellers, in all their richness and detail, to be heard. Involving them in clarifying and verifying data provided an important opportunity for them to shape the re-storying process. Whilst the grandparent narratives included in this paper are necessarily limited, considerably fuller accounts, rich in detail, are available elsewhere (Backhouse 2008). It is these that allowed for the analysis and interpretation of the ‘themed’ accounts of grandparent experiences developed in pursuit of a deeper understanding of the *meaning attached to these experiences*.

Given this study also incorporated a particular interest in grandparent *role* and *identity*, a narrative inquiry approach also allowed for ‘the researcher to *interpret*, constructing meaning where perhaps there was none, or where it was unknown’ (Kramp

2004, p. 110, emphasis added). In this way, the researcher's voice in narrative inquiry potentially complicates the research as it 'tells about' the participants' experience, influenced or informed by particular disciplinary or theoretical interests. In this case, Stryker & Burke's (2000) work on identity theory was employed since it provided for the narratives of the grandparents to be analysed in more depth through constructs including role identity, self-conception, self-definition, commitment and identity salience. Identity theory proposes that individuals may have any number of identities, in accordance with the number of relationships in which they are involved, and some identities have more self-relevance, or are more important to individuals, than others. Role identities are ranked in a hierarchy of salience and 'the higher the salience of an identity relative to other identities incorporated into the self, the greater the probability of behavioural choices in accordance with the expectations attached to that identity' (Stryker & Burke 2000, p. 286). Identity theory also proposes that 'the salience of a particular identity will be determined by the person's commitment to that role' (Hogg *et al.* 1995, p. 258). Such insights from identity theory were considered important in 'making sense' of the experiences of the grandparents, resulting in the 'storied production' (Polkinghorne 1995, p. 19) or narrative explanation provided below.

Sample

A purposive sampling technique was used in order to select 'information-rich' participants for inclusion in the study (Patton 2002, p. 230). Grandparents of any age,

gender, cultural background or socio-economic group were eligible, but were required to be involved in the full-time caregiving role of their grandchildren, as well as being a resident of NSW. Grandparents were recruited through a number of NSW grandparent support groups and grandparent-as-parent forums, as well as recommendations made through personal and professional contacts in both Sydney and regional NSW. A total of 27 grandmothers and 7 grandfathers (caring for 45 grandchildren) took part in the study. The participants were drawn from a range of metropolitan (n=8) and rural (n=26) areas of NSW. The grandparents ranged in age from their late 40's to mid 70's (m=56.7 years) and came from a diverse range of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. All grandparents were Australian citizens, 32 were of Anglo-Celtic background and 2 were Indigenous Australians. Five grandparents were in the full-time paid workforce, 8 were in part-time paid work, 12 were unemployed and 9 were retired from the work force. The grandchildren they were caring for ranged in age from 1-17 years old (m=8.5 years).

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth face-to-face interviews as these were considered to align most closely with the principles of narrative inquiry. Since it is the intent of a narrative to 'connect events, actions and experiences and move them through time' (Kramp 2004, p. 110) the following two questions only were used to assist the grandparents to 'tell about' their life as experienced:

1. 'Can you tell me how the grandchildren came into your care?'

2. 'Can you tell me about your experiences of raising your grandchildren?'

This approach was not only intended to privilege the grandparent participants as the story-tellers but also required a researcher stance that was 'tuned in' to the stories they told and the ways they constructed their stories and, hence, themselves. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in detail the ethical issues embedded in a narrative approach it is important to note that Plummer's five ethical principles of 'care, justice, recognition, equality and minimal harm' (2001, p. 229), underpinned the entire research process and, particularly, the process of the interviews. All Southern Cross University Ethics Committee guidelines and protocols were adhered to in relation to advice regarding information and purpose of the research, as well as issues of consent, confidentiality, privacy and anonymity of participants.

The majority of the grandparents were interviewed in their homes, while others chose public venues, such as parks, coffee shops, or community centres as the preferred meeting place. On average, each interview took between one and one-and-a-half hours to complete, was audio taped and all recordings were fully transcribed. The transcriptions constituted 'texts' rich in description, which became the object of analysis and interpretation.

Approach to Analysis

The three-phase process of analysis firstly required attending carefully to each story, reading and re-reading the stories documented in the transcriptions. In this way, the

whole of each individual story was engaged before themes common *across* the stories were generated. The latter process was assisted by utilising the qualitative software program, NUD*IST. As previously signalled, a paradigmatic approach to analysis (Polkinghorne 1995) was implemented in this first phase, identifying major categories and themes in the data; secondly, a narrative analysis focused on uncovering an emerging story of the grandparents' experiences whilst acknowledging that some particularity and nuance will inevitably be lost in this process; and thirdly, the narratives were interpreted through the lens of identity theory as a further re-telling of the story. A second round of interviews was subsequently conducted with five of the participants in order to verify and confirm the emerging interpretations and these follow-up interviews contributed to the final storied account of the grandparents' experiences.

In the following sections we discuss two significant and related findings of the study, both of which are critically important for social workers and others endeavouring to understand, and work effectively with, the complex realities of grandparents such as those involved in this study. These findings focus on the paradoxical nature of the experience of caring for grandchildren and the consequential impact on role identity.

The Paradoxical Experience of Caring for Grandchildren

In the interviews, most grandparents described in candid detail the context in which their grandchildren had been placed in their care. The stories they told were centred around a number of complex, interconnected issues, with the most frequently cited being their adult child's addiction to drugs and alcohol:

The grandchildren came into my care because both parents are addicted to drugs...When I went to court the mother admitted that she was having at least fifteen bongs a day...plus she's added alcohol to that, too, now...it's been hell, you know, their continuous use of drugs never cease, never cease. (Pam)

Their Mum's on drugs and drinks alcohol. The children were being neglected. We let it go for a little while, then we thought, it's not right for them. (Miriam)

Other issues included incarceration or mental health problems experienced by the children's parents, sole parenthood and the problems of raising children alone, as well as the grandchildren's exposure to domestic violence or abuse. One grandparent in the sample was also raising her grandchild because both parents had been infected with the HIV/AIDS virus. Whilst many of these reasons echo those previously reported (Joslin 2000; Smith *et al.* 2000; Mason *et al.* 2002; Patton 2004; Worrall 2006; Baldock 2007), a number of grandparents also pointed to issues of apathy or indifference, which have been less explicitly documented in existing studies. Two of the grandparents, for example, spoke at length about the choices their own daughters had made, with one referring specifically to the 'unencumbered single life' that took precedence over parenting:

She came up one weekend and said that she was going to put him up for adoption. She couldn't look after him, she couldn't cope, she didn't want to be a single parent and could I take him? Well...she came in the morning about half past nine and she was gone again by eleven, and she sent all his stuff up by carrier...she got on with her 20-star lifestyle. (Alice)

Embedded throughout the narratives of the grandparents were insights into the challenges they negotiated, often on a daily basis, as they endeavoured to ensure their grandchildren were not unduly disadvantaged by their circumstances. These difficulties are consistent with the findings of previous overseas and Australian research which reveals that becoming a custodial grandparent can have many negative personal, interpersonal and economic consequences (Cox 2000; Solomon & Marx 2000; Fitzpatrick 2004). Financial issues were of paramount importance for almost all the grandparents interviewed, and even though most were receiving some kind of assistance through State or Federal Government provisions, they spoke at length of their struggle to provide for the needs of their grandchildren on limited income and with reduced opportunities for employment. As Katie explains:

As he's got older the expenses have increased, things for school, sporting equipment, classes for things, shoes, all sorts of expenses in getting him to things, soccer and things like that.

Compounding the financial pressures, for many grandparents, were complex legal issues that were also clearly impacting on their emotional wellbeing. A number of grandparents spoke about the injustice they perceived in the Australian legal system in relation to financial aid and legal representation. In seeking custody of grandchildren, their adult children were entitled to Legal Aid, whereas the grandparents may not have qualified because of home ownership, retirement savings or current employment. Pam explains her particular disadvantaged position as a result of being in the workforce:

The thing with the mother is she could take us back to court and keep us there forever, because she got Legal Aid, we didn't.

Key amongst the challenges that a majority of the grandparents referred to were those associated with their limited physical or emotional health. A number of grandparents made some reference to concerns about what grandchildren might 'miss out on' because they were unable to engage in the same physical activities associated with the parenting role that they might have had when raising their own children. Many grandparents also referred to the stress they experienced in dealing with the grandchildren's parents, the child welfare authorities and the court system, which often far outweighed the pressures of raising their grandchildren. As Cindy explains:

The day-to-day caring is tiring, but perfectly manageable and often absolutely joyful. It's all the worry about them being left with us, whether the court will overrule DoCS and take them away, even the access visits they have to endure with their

parents...so it's all that side of it that's hard. Actually looking after the children is easy.

A number of grandparents told of some particular challenges associated with the pain of their adult children being in prison, suffering from a mental illness, or only being allowed supervised access with their own children. The grandparents' feelings of sadness, frustration, grief and loss were palpable in these interviews as they described how they tried to balance the care and protection of their grandchildren alongside maintaining some sort of relationship between the children and their parents. In addition, many of these grandparents were concerned about the physical and emotional health problems of their grandchildren, often the result of abuse or neglect by their parents:

(Granddaughter) was born exposed to amphetamines, alcohol, dope, you know lots and lots of things, poor nutrition. (Joanne)

When we got her at 14 months, she didn't know what her feet were for. If you'd stand her up on her feet she'd scream. She never walked until she was 18 months.

(Julie)

The interviews also revealed a number of future concerns many grandparents held. These included worries about securing a future for their grandchildren through a 'good' education, raising teenagers in a 'modern world', as well as what would happen if

and when they were no longer able to care for their grandchildren. Such concerns resonate with those previously identified by Richards (2001) and Orb & Davey (2004). The grandparent participants' accounts about the future were interspersed with narratives about the complete change of lifestyle that the full time care of grandchildren heralded for most of the grandparents interviewed. Key issues included loss of employment, or balancing work while caring for grandchildren, in addition to surrendering traditional grandparenting roles, retirement plans, routines and activities, and re-negotiating many existing friendships.

Whilst the pain of many of these grandparents was woven throughout their narratives about the challenges and concerns they faced, every grandparent offered, without hesitation, insights into the many benefits they identified, both for themselves and their grandchildren, in taking on the full-time parenting role. These included a chance at second-time parenting, watching their grandchildren grow, spending time with them and having them as an integral part of their lives. A number of grandparents talked explicitly of the love they felt for their grandchildren and described how their lives were enriched after taking on the caregiving role:

The benefits are I've watched them, I just look at them growing up...I look at these kids, these four kids and I can't imagine our lives without them... (Carol)

All I have to say is that we'll have to die to part from them. I would not part with them for anything. (Brian)

Many such stories, whilst located in quite specific and unique relational contexts, are consistent with other studies which have also revealed that, in spite of its many challenges, the grandparent caregiver role can be very rewarding (Minkler & Roe 1993; Richards 2001; Fitzpatrick 2004).

Some grandparents also believed that their grandchildren benefited from being raised by their grandparents who had more life experience, more patience, more tolerance and were better able to deal with children who often came into their care with a range of psychological issues and behavioural problems. The perceived benefits to grandchildren included feelings of security and stability, knowing they could rely on their grandparents, as well as a marked improvement in school-work because of the time and effort grandparents were prepared to spend to ensure grandchildren's success at school.

A strong theme in the data was the dissonance experienced by the grandparents as they moved between their idealised notion of grandparenting, to the everyday realities of being grandparents-as-parents. Instead of acting as a friend or confidant to their grandchildren, grandparents say they have now become disciplinarians, providers and authority figures:

Grandfathers are meant to be there to play with their grandchildren and give them lollies and do all nice things to them, not chastise them and tell them they can't do this and they can't do that. (Jeremy)

It was evident from the study that the loss of the traditional grandparent role, an important and widely respected social identity, had resulted in a complexity of experience whereby feelings of sadness, disappointment and grief were simultaneously bound up with the recognition of many 'positives' associated with the full-time care of grandchildren. Drawing on identity theory, this 'to and fro' of the grandparent experience, closely tied to role conflict, is examined in more depth below.

Issues of Role Identity

It is clear that for most grandparents in the study the movement between role identities (of 'being' both grandparent and parent) resulted in a complexity of experience they had to negotiate on a daily basis so as to preserve the interests and well-being of their grandchildren. Identity theory proposes that having two oppositional identities activated at the same time will result in some degree of dissonance (Burke 2003). Firstly, one or both of the identities may shift as their meanings change and, secondly, one or the other identity may become less important, or salient, or the commitment to the identity may become lower as the person withdraws from relationships involved with the identity (Burke 2003).

In analysing the narratives of the grandparents it was clear they experienced some degree of dissonance as they moved within and between different states of being both grandparent and grandparent-as-parent. This dissonance, or role-identity conflict between a presumed ('traditional') grandparent role and the lived reality of the grandparent-as-

parent role, was particularly evident throughout the narratives in terms of variously expressed 'otherness' or 'difference'. The paradoxical 'to and fro' dynamic that made up the grandparent experience can be understood in terms of a number of binaries embedded throughout the grandparents' narratives.

Language theorists Saussure (1974) and Derrida (1974) contend that language and culture are organised by systems of binary oppositions, however the terms in each binary are not of equal value. One half of the pair is in a privileged position, whereas the other is marginalised, as illustrated, for example, by the overarching binary that emerged in the findings of this study, *myth/reality*. This binary reflects what is, perhaps, at the core of the role-identity conflict, that being the struggle to be both parent and grandparent to their grandchildren:

I feel like I'm not being able to be a grandparent, I'm more of a parent than a grandparent now. (Nancy)

I've never liked disciplining him and to me the whole idea of having a grandson was that you didn't have to discipline and you just enjoyed him. (Andrew)

Further, the loss of the traditional grandparent role and consequential shift to the grandparent-as-parent role had impacted on the grandparents in a number of different ways, including provoking feelings of being unrecognized, disadvantaged, misunderstood and isolated within the community. It appeared that the grandparents' experiences of

raising their grandchildren had shaped their identity such that their experiences were simultaneously described in terms of further binaries including 'visible/invisible/', 'deserving/undeserving', 'voiced/silenced' and 'included/excluded'.

Consistent with a narrative inquiry methodology, this 'storied production' (Polkinghorne 1995, p. 19) that revealed a binary dimension to the experiences as described, was taken back to five of the original sample of 34 grandparent participants as an integral part of the 'restorying' process. The five grandparents were selected to ensure a cross section of contexts, views and experiences.

In these follow-up interviews, grandparents were provided with an overview of the findings as described and thematised through the paradigmatic analysis, drawing particular attention to the paradoxical dimension of the experiences as told. The participating grandparents were then invited to comment on the overarching binary, identified in the narratives as myth/reality (the 'to and fro' between the 'mythical' and 'real' grandparent role). The responses from the grandparents were unanimous in confirming the struggle between the two states of being a grandparent, as Joanne and Cindy explain:

I want to take on the grandmother role and treat them as a grandmother would, but I can't because I have to be the disciplinarian. (Joanne)

I don't feel like a grandparent, I feel like a parent...I thought that being a grandmother would involve being able to indulge them and spoil them and then hand them back. I guess that's how I thought it would be. Well, it's entirely different because I don't have that role at all. I have the role of a mother, because it's full time 24/7, there's no handing them back, there's no taking a break. (Cindy)

However, a follow on question regarding the perceived visibility/invisibility of the grandparent-as-parent role evoked a mixed response from the grandparents:

All my friends think we're doing a wonderful job, it's a good thing grandparents are raising a child, but as far as I guess the community in general is concerned, the only one who takes any notice of you are the welfare people. (Jeremy)

I'm trying to do it (raise grandchildren) to save the government money, but anything that's handed out is handed out to parents, but not grandparents. Yes, I suppose I feel a bit invisible that way. (Helen)

The participants were asked to comment on the deserving/undeserving binary identified by grandparents' feelings of being disadvantaged because they were 'family':

If you foster children you're appreciated, but if you're a grandparent that's expected of you, and that's not on. Because, it's not really our job, so I think if any of us do that sort of thing we should be appreciated more than anyone. (Helen)

I think the services are made for foster carers. They don't have to jump through the hoops as much as we have to get some sort of payment . . . I think we should really have the same services for grandparents raising children as people who foster children. We should get all the same things. (Joy)

When grandparents were asked to comment on the voiced/silenced binary, they were unanimous in their response that grandparent caregivers did not have a voice and that their position in the community was not recognised or understood:

Yes, we don't have a voice. As I said, you can say whatever you like, you can do whatever you like, but we're different, we're not included, we don't count. You're family, you're supposed to do that. (Helen)

Yes, people think you are minding the grandchildren. They've not usually come up against this situation before and they're completely unfamiliar with it and that does lower your visibility within your community and therefore your voice, because no one understands the situation, even when you're saying to them, "I raise these grandchildren". (Joanne)

There was a mixed response from the grandparents to the request for comment on the included/excluded binary.

They (grandparent caregivers) usually don't get a chance to interact with their peers because of their different circumstances . . . Their friends are out having lunch and they're at home washing nappies or feeding babies or something. (Joanne)

I've got a lot of friends and they all expect me to bring the children, so I don't feel isolated because they always include me which is good. So, no, I don't get isolated, it's me that's too blasted tired to do anything. I want to be isolated. I want to just be home and curl up when the kids go to sleep. (Helen)

By the conclusion of the second round of interviews, the restorying process had generated further rich insights into the meaning of the grandparent experiences, particularly in relation to the complex interplay of binary experiences linked to their changed role and seemingly shaping their identities. A major issue to emerge from the restorying phase of this research, not so readily apparent until the second round of interviews, was the prevailing sense of injustice experienced by the grandparents.

Conclusion

It was very clear throughout the narratives that the disruption to grandparents' self-verification process had evoked feelings of disappointment and frustration at the injustice of their situation. This was particularly, and most frequently, evidenced by grandparents' comments in relation to 'saving the government money' by raising their grandchildren,

yet not receiving adequate financial and social support to do this job. Grandparents believed they had always paid their taxes, but felt frustrated when they needed help, yet ‘the government doesn’t want to know you’ and ‘anything a grandparent wants they have to fight for it’. Many of the grandparent narratives made reference to a belief that foster carers were ‘appreciated’ for the job they do, however grandparent caregivers were ‘expected’ to do the same job without any recognition. Some grandparents also believed that there is a lot of stigma attached to the grandparent-as-parent role, that they have been unjustly blamed for having to raise their grandchildren, and are ‘somehow responsible for what’s gone wrong’

According to Hegtved (2006), individuals use social experiences to produce a justice evaluation. This is usually based upon their beliefs about what is just, together with processes of social cognition and comparison. Further, in terms of the theoretical interest of this study, identity theorists have examined how self-verification assumptions relate to the distributive justice process and people’s emotional responses to injustice. For example, Stets (2003) found that any difference between one’s *actual* reward and one’s *just* reward in a situation produced a state of injustice that resulted in feelings of anger, resentment and disgust.

On the basis of the data available in this study, grandparents-as-parents are committed emotionally, financially and morally to the welfare of their grandchildren and will care for them regardless of whether or not they are financially or socially supported. This unconditional commitment to the grandparent-as-parent role means that grandparent

caregivers are potentially vulnerable to the marginalisation that West (2002, p. 91)

attributes to others who perform caregiving labour:

caregivers – whether or not they choose to become such, whether or not they are parents, and whether they are men or women – enjoy no rights of support.

Whilst this study involved only a very limited sample of 34 grandparents, the interviews generated much rich data providing a significant depth of insight into the richness and complexity of the experiences of grandparents raising their grandchildren. The study has contributed to further understanding of the grandparent-as-parent role in that it has identified the inherently paradoxical nature of the experience, including some of the binaries that describe the tensions around the grandparent-as-parent role. More extensive national and international research is required in order to further examine the role dissonance identified by the grandparents-as-parents in this study, so that policy and practice might better respond to this. Further research also needs to be undertaken that focuses on the experiences of children growing up in grandparent-headed households, as the grandparents' narratives indicate their concerns about the effect on the children of the often complex circumstances leading up to the placement of the children in their care. In the meantime, grandparents-as-parents' experiences of being invisible, undeserving, silenced and excluded within the community, while not always immediately evident, need to be recognised and attended to by those who work in the social welfare sector and

the programs and services that potentially support them. Indeed, it is hoped this study will contribute important evidence about the unique and complex circumstances of grandparent-headed families to help inform the work of policy makers, health professionals, social workers and teachers, along with members of the wider community.

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