Contemporary grandparenting is at the centre of family relationships, but grandparenting practices are very different today than 50 years ago, and differ greatly across cultural contexts. To fully understand grandparenting, it is valuable to adopt a comparative and temporal perspective, taking account of cultural norms in different societies and broader societal changes over time. Consequently, grandparenting practices and the meaning of being a grandparent vary greatly between societies and within the same cultural context over time (Arber and Timonen 2012).

Grandparenting should be considered as an active and dynamic family practice, with grandparents and other family members exercising agency in constructing their relationships with one another. Although extensive research on ‘doing family’ has examined family practices among couples and their children (Morgan 2011), fewer studies consider family practices among extended family members. It is important to consider the everyday practices of grandparenting, and how these are negotiated across both the dyadic grandparent–grandchild relationship and the triad of grandparent–adult child–grandchild. Underlying the family practices of ‘doing’ grandparenting, it is essential to recognise that family relationships are dynamic and changing, as well as being shaped by material and structural realities that face individual family members and the family as a whole. Although these structural constraints often operate within the bounded household context, research on grandparenting brings into sharp relief how family relationships that transcend household boundaries are also influenced by structural constraints and cultural norms.

Gender has not been highly visible in research on grandparenting. Much research on grandparent care for grandchildren implicitly assumes that the primary caregiver is the grandmother, with ‘grandparenting’ often a euphemism for ‘grandmothering’. Few studies have examined family practices associated with grandmother versus grandfather care in a nuanced way. For example, we know little about whether grandfathering practices largely support the grandmothers’ practices, with his involvement secondary to the grandmother’s (Tarrant’s [2012] research on grandfathering is one exception). How gendered grandparenting practices vary between cultural contexts remains a largely unexplored area, and presents a fruitful agenda for future research.

This chapter firstly focuses on macro-social issues by considering how various societal changes impact on the nature of grandparents’ involvement in grandchildren’s lives (including grandchild care), demonstrating the interconnections between families, labour markets and state
policies, as well as between the public and private spheres. Second, it considers cultural norms about grandparenting and the agency of grandparents, and how clashes between norms and agency may result in ambivalence. Finally, it emphasises how grandparenting is part of a complex web of negotiated family relationships, within which the grandchild may impact on the grandparent’s attitudes and practices. In all three areas (macro-social, cultural norms, negotiated relationships), it is important to consider differences between cultural contexts.

Societal changes and grandparenting

Many societal and cultural changes shape the practices and norms of grandparenting. Demographic change has produced a rapid increase in longevity across the globe, which means that grandchildren will share a much longer period of life with their grandparents (Phillipson 2010). Within the increasing number of three-, four- or even five-generational families, there is the potential for grandchildren to establish longer-lasting relationships with their grandparents, which often now extend well into the grandchild’s adulthood. Declines in fertility have been rapid, especially in southern Europe, China and Asian societies, resulting in fewer grandchildren and the development of ‘bean pole’ families: families with several surviving generations, but few members in each generation (Bengtson and Harootyan 1994). Fewer grandchildren might mean that grandparents ‘invest’ more time and resources in their relationships with each grandchild, developing stronger emotional bonds. Social and cultural contexts shape the rationale for this investment and the forms that it takes. For instance, in China this investment may take the form of grandparents looking after grandchildren ‘left behind’ by their parents who are undertaking employment in geographically far-removed locations within the Chinese labour market (Baker and Silverstein 2012).

Other key changes in families include changing patterns of marriage, divorce and cohabitation. Divorce, separation (including from non-marital unions) and lone parenthood are increasingly prevalent in both the grandparent and the parent (middle) generation, often resulting in the establishment of ‘reconstituted’ families. Divorce, separation and lone parenthood in the middle generation may increase the extent of support provided by some (particularly maternal) grandparents, while fracturing relationships with other (particularly paternal) grandparents (Timonen and Doyle 2012). Divorce, separation and re-partnering in the grandparent and/or parent generation may potentially result in one grandchild having eight or more (step)grandparents. The prevalence of divorce, separation and reconstituted families varies greatly between societies, being higher in the US, UK and northern Europe; very low in China and Asian countries; and at an intermediate level in the predominantly Catholic countries of southern Europe and Ireland. We consider the agency exercised by grandparents in contexts of divorce/separation later in this chapter.

Changing involvement in grandchild care

In many cultural contexts, grandparents play a major role in grandchild care. This role is influenced by the increased labour force participation of women across societies, and societal policies regarding provision of childcare (when mothers are in paid work). Alongside increases in women’s employment, recent policy concerns internationally have emphasised the costs of the ‘ageing population’, leading to increases in retirement age and policy initiatives for employees to delay retirement and remain longer in the labour market. A key issue is therefore how grandparents’ participation in paid employment impacts on their ‘opportunity’ and willingness to act as grandchild carers.
Contemporary grandparents are becoming central to supporting the increased employment of women, but in ways that vary according to the cultural and welfare policy context, demonstrating the interconnections between families, cultural norms, labour markets and state policies. Herlofson and Hagestad (2012) contrast differences in grandparents’ roles across European societies in respect of women’s increased labour participation. In northern European countries, welfare policies support the provision of childcare and care for elders, with policies also encouraging greater gender equality in the domestic division of labour. Here grandparents provide occasional support and ‘baby-sitting’ for their grandchildren, but rarely undertake daily childcare to enable daughters/-in-law to work. They provide a backup resource in temporary emergencies or times of need, and are characterised as ‘family savers’, ‘complementing’ the provision of state-sponsored childcare services. In contrast, southern European welfare states provide very little childcare (or elder care), a situation that also reflects entrenched cultural attitudes and practices. This, together with marked gender-segregated roles in the domestic arena, has resulted in employed women turning to their mothers (the maternal grandmothers) for everyday childcare. A high proportion of grandparents in southern European countries provide daily childcare, characterised as ‘mother savers’. However, higher-earning women are better able to afford formal childcare, rather than relying on (and constraining the lives of ) their mothers/-in-law, leading to diverging cultures of grandparenting between higher and lower socio-economic status groups.

The UK contrasts with the Nordic and southern European welfare regimes, and is profoundly class-divided. Lack of affordable childcare means that working-class parents in particular turn to grandparents for daily childcare (or a regular commitment of childcare on 2–3 days per week) (Dench and Ogg 2002). Wheelock and Jones (2002) demonstrate the heavy reliance of employed mothers on grandparent care and that some grandparents give up paid work to provide regular grandchild care. The UK Grandparents Plus report (Glaser et al. 2010) highlights the considerable involvement of grandparents in regular childcare in the UK and across Europe, arguing that policies should be in place to provide financial and other supports for grandparents in this role. Thus, it is important to consider the interdependence between formal and informal systems of child care and how these differ across cultural contexts. While the employment of foreign domestic workers might be a ‘solution’ to support mothers’ paid work for middle/higher income families in Singapore and Hong Kong (Ko 2012, Sun 2012), these women domestic workers themselves have in many cases left behind grandparents, parents, children or grandchildren in their native country, limiting their own family relationships.

Grandparents perform the greatest childcare role where the middle generation is absent because of migration (as in China; Baker and Silverstein 2012), through HIV/AIDS (as in sub-Saharan Africa; Oduran and Oduran 2010) or because of inability to parent through mental health problems, drug or alcohol addiction (as in the US; Minkler 1999). Within such ‘skipped generation’ households, Baker and Silverstein (2012) show how the routes into ‘custodial grandparenting’ are very different in the US and China, leading to diverse consequences for the grandparents. In the US, custodial grandparents are disadvantaged on financial and health grounds prior to entry into custodial grandparenting, and their health and wellbeing then worsens, largely due to the accumulation of socio-economic disadvantages. In contrast, grandparents in rural China are advantaged in their health and financial assets prior to becoming custodial grandparents, and while in this role their health and wellbeing improves, both because of financial remittances from adult children and the psychological benefits of grandparenting.

The practices of grandparenting are therefore not static, and should be seen as dynamically changing in concert with other societal and cultural changes. However, within any culture there
are patterned diversities in grandparenting practices, associated with gender, family structure, material circumstances, ethnicity and geographical propinquity.

**Geographical distance, migration and changing cultures of communication**

Societal norms influence the geographical propinquity of grandparents to their grandchildren. Kohli and colleagues (2008) report marked differences across Europe in rates of grandparents living near adult children, varying from about 30 per cent of people aged 50 and over living within 1 km of a child in Sweden and Denmark to over 70 per cent in Italy, Spain and Greece. Following retirement, grandparents may move to live closer to grandchildren (Glaser et al. 2010). Geographical proximity of grandparents and grandchildren is crucial in providing ‘opportunities’ for interaction and thereby influencing cultures of grandparent-grandchild interaction (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1992). Globalisation has resulted in major migratory flows between countries for paid employment (such as for domestic work), and rural to urban migration for employment within countries. Migratory flows potentially sever or militate against contact between grandchildren and grandparents (except where the grandparents become primary carers due to the parents’ migration).

Societal changes associated with rapid developments in communications technology in both developed and developing countries may reduce the barriers of geographical distance. Apart from mobile telephones and email, grandparents and grandchildren may increasingly communicate within and between countries and continents through Skype calls and virtual activities such as Facebook. Through these, grandparenting relationships can be co-constructed, despite grandparents and grandchildren being divided by great geographical distances. Thus, new communication technologies may facilitate links between grandparents and grandchildren, for example opening new spaces for the performance of masculinities among grandfathers (Tarrant 2012), who may be more likely to communicate with their grandchildren through internet technologies. However, use of internet-based communication technologies is influenced by material and cultural resources that are more available or accessible to higher socio-economic groups, and in most countries, more prevalent among younger generations.

**Cultural norms, grandparenting practices and ambivalence**

As well as practical help and support provided by grandparents (Bengtson and Roberts 1991, Mancini and Bliezner 1989), grandparents transmit knowledge and values to younger generations (Kennedy 1992) and provide a sense of family heritage and stability (Kornhaber 1996). Research has demonstrated grandparental influence on grandchildren’s core moral values (King 2003) and religious practices and orientation (Copen and Silverstein 2007, Bengtson et al. 2013). Transmitting cultural values and meanings is a key part of passing on the culture of a group or a society. However, ethnic groups may differ in the extent to which grandparents are expected to play a central role in these processes. Grandparenting practices related to transmission of cultural values may lead to inter-generational conflicts or be constrained by transnational migration. Grandparents are part of dynamic and changing networks of family relationships; how these dynamics, together with broader societal forces, shape the cultural norms and practices of grandparenting represents an exciting research agenda for cultural gerontologists.

Cultural norms regarding the appropriate roles of, and behaviour towards, grandparents have changed over time and vary markedly between societies. Grandparenthood is often equated with ‘old age’ in the popular imagination, although grandparents range in age from their thirties.
to centenarians. Cultural norms may differ between ‘historical generations’ associated with particular ‘birth cohorts’ (Mannheim 1952), each generation having different historical experiences that shape their outlook and attitudes (Arber and Attias-Donfut 2000). Grandparents who have lived through different historical periods and societal contexts enter later life with varying attitudes and expectations that influence their perspectives on grandparenting. The image of the grandmother knitting in a rocking chair, or the old widow dressed in black, is now outdated in the western cultural context, where contemporary grandmothers are less constrained by cultural expectations of passivity. The ‘baby-boomers’ in North America and many European countries, born in the late 1940s and early 1950s, are entering later life with altered cultural values, as well as being healthier, wealthier and more oriented to leisure than earlier cohorts. We can therefore expect that this generation will practise grandparenting in very different ways to their parents.

A key normative cultural change in contemporary western societies is the expectation that older people should be active and productive (Bowling 2003). Grandparents may subscribe to the cultural norm of ‘active ageing’ as exemplified by leading an active lifestyle and demonstrating agency over their activities. However, this contemporary cultural mandate to ‘active’ or ‘successful’ ageing may conflict with other cultural norms and expectations, such as to ‘be there’ (available to support and care) for grandchildren (May et al. 2012). Thus, the norm of ‘active ageing’ may conflict with expectations of the parent generation that grandparents will be available to care for grandchildren while the mothers work. Conflict between these two cultural norms may lead to growing tensions or ambivalence between the desires of the grandparent generation for ‘active ageing’ and the requirements of the middle generation for grandchild care, tensions that are likely to be more keenly felt by older women than men.

Older people may experience ‘ambivalence’ (that is, both negative and positive sentiments) regarding their relationship with adult children (Luescher and Pillemer 1998). Ambivalence may also extend to the grandparenting role, reflected for instance in the expectation that grandparents adhere both to the ‘norm of non-interference’ (Troll and Bengtson 1979) and the ‘norm of obligation’ to provide support when required by the younger generations. In the UK, May et al. (2012) report the ubiquity of norms of grandparents to ‘be there’ for their grandchildren while also ‘not interfering’ with the middle generations’ parenting practices. They highlight how grandparents negotiate competing norms within their everyday practices of grandparenting. The norm of grandparents being a ‘good parent’ to their own adult children implies allowing them to be independent and thereby ‘not interfering’, but this can conflict with perceived responsibilities to their grandchildren.

The clash of cultural norms may be greater in specific societal or material contexts, increasing the need for negotiations between competing understandings of different kin responsibilities, tensions and ambivalence. For example, the changes in Asian societies have been particularly rapid, resulting in a ‘profound generational gap regarding social norms, expectations and cultural practices’ (Izuhara 2010: 3). Ko (2012) highlights how a pronounced generational gap in cultural norms exists in Hong Kong, creating substantial ambivalence related to the conflict between the filial norms of piety towards grandparents and current norms that grandparents should provide extensive everyday support to their grandchildren.

Ambivalence and how grandparents negotiate contradictions between cultural norms may be particularly poignant in cases of divorce, especially in contexts where divorce is less normative. Timonen and Doyle (2012) examine grandparenting following an adult child’s divorce in Ireland, illustrating grandparents’ key role in the process of reorganising relationships within families following divorce. Grandparents use agency to maintain (and sometimes to reduce) contact with their grandchildren, and actively renegotiate boundaries around the cultural expectations about their grandparenting practices. Timonen and Doyle argue that grandparental agency was
primarily motivated by the wish to maintain their grandchild’s wellbeing and to bridge formally dissolved family relations in order to secure their own continued contact with grandchildren. However, grandparents’ own wellbeing was also the driving consideration in situations where agency was used to reduce grandchild involvement that was experienced as onerous or excessive. Far from the image of ‘invisible facilitators’, some grandparents emerged as active and determined actors who shaped the level and nature of their involvement in the post-separation family. However, Timonen and Doyle (2012) also point to considerable differences in grandparents’ ability to exercise agency, and the continuing cultural expectations on many grandparents (e.g. to provide grandchild care). Understanding variation in grandparental agency between different cultural contexts is an important task for future research.

A relational perspective and grandchildren’s agency

Earlier research on grandparents emphasised the importance of grandparents as socialisation agents for grandchildren (Neugarten and Weinstein 1964), and portrayed a one-way influence of grandparents on grandchildren. Later work also emphasised the potentially mediating role of the middle generation in influencing grandparent-grandchild relationships (Robertson 1976). This ‘downward’ model has neglected consideration of upward flows of influence from the grandchild to the grandparent, and that older grandchildren may influence the nature of the grandparent–adult child relationship; all three generations should be considered in order to fully understand grandparent-grandchild relationships (Hagestad 1985).

Grandparenting, by definition, involves a dyadic relationship with one or multiple grandchildren. Literature from the sociology of childhood over the last 20 years (James et al. 1998) has emphasised the active ways that children influence relationships with their parents and other adults. Cultural changes in norms regarding childhood, and the expectations of being a grandchild, will also influence the nature of grandparent-grandchild relationships. The voices of grandchildren have been surprisingly absent in research on grandparenting. Clearly each party will have differing perspectives on the nature of the grandparent-grandchild relationship, as well as varying degrees of influence on different aspects of this relationship. Research in the sociology of childhood has emphasised that children have agency over their relationships and has pioneered new methodologies for researching and hearing the voices of children (Greene and Hogan 2005), but has not yet had a major influence on approaches within research on grandparent-grandchild relationships.

The practices of grandparenting can only be understood through a broader relational approach that ‘emphasises the individual’s place within a dynamic and continuous set of transactional processes’ (Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips 2011: 212). Thus, grandparents must be seen within an interactional network that involves not only the grandparent and grandchild, but also the parent(s) and potentially other family members, embedded within a cultural context. Within a relational perspective all three generations may be seen as having agency over the nature of the relationships, which are also contoured by cultural norms of grandparenting that vary by gender, class and welfare state context.

Conclusion

To understand grandparenting practices, we need to consider both the changing cultural scripts for older people as well as changing norms about children and childhood. While it is important to emphasise diversity and the agency of both parties in the dyadic relationship of grandparent and grandchild, as well as the agency of the parent (middle) generation, we need to be mindful
of how cultural and societal changes intersect with material and socio-economic resources, which contribute to the everyday realities of grandparenting practices.

Gender often remains insufficiently acknowledged in studies of grandparenting. For example, where an older married couple provide grandchild care, few studies analyse the gender divisions of grandchild care in terms of the relative roles of each grandparent. Future studies need to more explicitly tease out the gendered dimensions of grandparenting practices, including gender differences in emotional aspects of relationships with grandchildren. Much more research is needed on how grandparenting practices and norms vary by the intersections of gender, lineage and step-grandparenting, as well as class and ethnicity.

In western countries, the increasing prevalence of divorce, re-partnering and step-families means that step-grandparenting is a more common experience, yet remains poorly understood. New patterns in family reciprocity, including within step-families and transnational families, need further study. Divorce and family reconstitution throw into sharp relief issues of how gender is implicated in grandparenting practices. We need to better understand the constraints and possibilities associated with grandfathering following divorce and widowhood, and how this contrasts with grandmothersing by divorced/widowed women. The growth of same-sex families (Heaphy 2007) has not been matched by research on grandparenting in relation to same-sex couples within the parent (middle) generation or the grandparent generation (Oriel and Fruhau 2012). It remains fundamental to consider how gender influences grandparenting in the contexts of divorce and family re-formation, as well as considering lesbian and gay parents/grandparents, regarding the attitudes and practices of members of all three relevant generations.

This chapter has discussed some of the newer contours of grandparenting in different societal and cultural contexts, emphasising the importance of examining how grandparenting is influenced by cultural norms and welfare policies, as well as global trends associated with demographic changes, migration and increases in women’s employment. The importance of examining the doing of grandparenting has been emphasised, together with the value of using a relational perspective to understand the negotiated and culturally embedded nature of grandparent–adult child–grandchild relationships and the agency of each party within these three-generational relationships. Key cross-cutting dimensions include the salience of gender, age (or generation), marital status and inequalities associated with class, cultural and material resources.

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References


