

**Grandmotherhood:  
Meaning, Experience and Practice**

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## Abstract

This thesis presents a contemporary view of wider kinship relations from the perspective of twenty grandmothers living in the rural area of North Yorkshire. My research adopts a feminist methodology and uses a qualitative method in the form of in depth interviews. Applying a feminist life course approach to the data my findings are that grandmothering plays a significant role in this group of women's lives highlighting the demographic and social changes that have resulted in many of the women being more closely involved in caring for wider kin than previous generations. While acknowledging that the practice of grandmothering is varied and complex, my findings are that *being a grandmother* is often experienced as a continuation of mothering, framed within the dominant ideals of maternal discourse and the current child-centredness of family life. By applying a 'gendered lens' (Calasanti and Slevin, 2001) to the data the assumed universality of the 'I' of late modernity's individual and 'the self as project' (Giddens, 1992) and dominant male understandings of time are brought into question. I argue that *part* of the participants' sense of self as grandmothers is gained vicariously through their input into the lives of their children and grandchildren, their sense of self being experienced in relation to and through the lives of others, and, as such, they are the co-authors of others' biographies. Through an analysis of the women's stories I contend that older women as grandmothers are located at the intersection of the traditional notion of female identity as that of 'living for the family' and contemporary ideas of individualization and 'living a life of one's own'. They are located differently in the life course than mothers thus providing a different perspective on the self and the family. I propose that as grandmothers their sense of self is actively, self-reflexively composed from multiple times and lives thereby developing an integrated, multi-layered, denser, sense of self.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction:

### Coming to Question Grandmotherhood

The turn of the century is a good vantage point from which to view and evaluate social change. It is a time for celebration, time for looking to the future and time for taking stock and learning from the past. This was also true for me on a personal level. The millennium coincided with my turning fifty, starting a PhD in Women's Studies, the break up of a marriage of thirty years and becoming a grandmother. All of these major milestones and transitions in my life caused me to reflect on how I might manage these separate but linked events. I had up to this point in time understood and managed my own *established* location as a mother, daughter, wife and business woman well. However, my future position as a grandmother, a member of a different generation, a single woman, one of the over fifties and a mature student certainly felt like stepping out into the unknown. In many ways my vision of this stage of my life and beyond did not fit with what I understood to be expected of a grandmother. I began to question how I would combine, or manage, what appeared to me to be diverse and competing positions. I did not feel old, but I was left asking the question, how did others see me and what would my family expect of me as a grandmother? How did I feel about having the title 'grandmother' applied to me?

I was one of those women who had 'embraced' writers such as Germaine Greer's ideas of later life as a time of 'freedom and challenge' (1992), a time for a 'life of one's own'. I was concerned that the expectations that my family might attach to my new status as a grandmother might prevent me from enjoying the freedom from family

commitments and the new directions I had envisaged for myself at this stage in life. Thinking about my own situation brought me to question whether my concerns about becoming a grandmother were really so different from how many other women of my age may feel.

Understanding what it meant to be a grandmother at this point in time, and how middle-aged and older women might identify with the role of grandmother therefore, was something I needed to explore. It was therefore as much through trying to make sense of the changes that were going on in my own life, as through seeking to understand the wider changes in society that provided much of the impetus for this particular area of study. I was very much aware that by becoming a grandmother at the age of fifty-one that this relationship had the potential to exist for many years, perhaps a third of my life span.

However, I recognised only too well the complexity of my own life, and the already heavy demands that were placed on my time, energy and emotions. Linking my personal experience to my observations of how women's lives and families have changed, prompted me to question how this relationship might develop and what it might mean to me and many other women of my generation. On another level, I wondered how my grandchild's relationship with me might differ from the relationship I had with my own grandmother.

### **Personal reflections**

Thinking about my role as a grandmother caused me to reflect on the meaning of my own relationship with my paternal grandmother. What did this relationship mean to me and what might it have meant to her? In considering my relationship with my grandmother, in retrospect, I can say that it varied over time, but continued to have significant meaning for me over a period of thirty years (see Illustration 1). At times our relationship involved seeing each other almost on a daily basis. At other

## Illustration 1 My Grandmothers and Me



My Maternal Grandmother and Me  
(Summer 1950)



My Paternal Grandmother and Me  
(Summer 1955)

times it was more a question of simply 'knowing she was there if needed'. My memory of her is that she always had an abundance of that rare commodity, time; time to listen; time to talk; time to tell stories; time to pass on skills; time for me as an individual who happened to be her grandchild. 'Grandma' had time for me when other members of the family seemed to be preoccupied with the everyday matters of managing work, a home and family. In hindsight, then, I can say that it was, for me, a relationship from which I gained a great deal. Life with grandma granted me another dimension to family life, one that allowed me freedom to express myself as an individual, while at the same time giving me the security and support that I needed to grow as an independent person. Time with grandma was precious and is a special 'something' that I find hard to put into words, but for which I am eternally grateful. However, will my busy and complex lifestyle allow me 'time' for my grandchild? How might I choose to spend my time? Time as a resource within today's family life is in short supply; therefore, the ways in which older women as grandmothers attempt to manage their time is a factor that I felt needed to be addressed.

Thinking about my relationship with my grandmother raises the question of how relevant the role model given to me by my grandmother, a woman born at the end of the nineteenth century, will be to me, a grandmother at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Indeed, does my experience of the relationship between a grandmother and her grandchild, which appears to fit with traditional, some might say, mythical, notions of grandmothers, warrant any place in today's changing social world<sup>1</sup>? Is my recollection of this relationship steeped with nostalgia for close, loving, family relationships that no longer exist, if indeed they ever did? How will the complexity of today's lifestyles, and

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on styles of grandmothers and types of grandmothers see Farmer (2000).

particularly the ever-increasing demands of women's working lives outside the home, affect the relationship? I was left with the unanswered question of what the relationship I had with my grandmother meant to her. Did she value our relationship as much as I did? Was she doing what she felt was her duty, or did she choose to care for me out of love, and because she too gained from the experience? I like to think that it was the latter, but as I cannot now ask her I will never know.

The journey that brought me to this research project, therefore, draws upon my personal location that includes my political position as a feminist and a postgraduate student. This has influenced both my choice of subject and the research process. Central to the research is the over-riding feminist principle 'the personal is political' in questioning dominant ideals of and assumptions about gender and ageing. This research is grounded in feminist theory and research methodology that, through the validation of women's everyday experiences, makes it possible for women's voices to be heard, thus providing alternative ways of seeing and knowing.

This chapter sets out the aims and rationale of this study highlighting a series of inter-connecting pathways running through this research project. Providing a backdrop against which to situate my research, the current socio-cultural and demographic changes relating to 'the family' and kinship relations, overlaid with two important and linked concepts, that is gender and ageing, are outlined. The chapter concludes by setting out the structure of the thesis.

## **Aims**

The aims of this study are to present a view of contemporary family life from the perspective of older women as grandmothers making visible the *meaning* of what it is to *be* a grandmother. Drawing on interviews with the twenty grandmothers, it is this particular group of older women's understandings of their everyday lives that are the focus of the research. This is vital for any 'genuine' understanding of what it means to be an older woman and a grandmother at this point in time. My research seeks to uncover the ways in which grandmothers negotiate and make sense of their lives in the context of their personal, historical and family time set within socio-cultural and demographic change. Through an analysis of the data, this study intends to establish whether being a grandmother plays a significant part in this particular group of older women's lives.

An integral part of this analysis is to understand how family and kinship changes affect the experience of being a grandmother. Judith Stacey (1996), for example, uses the term post-modern family life 'to signal the contested, ambivalent, and undecided character of contemporary family cultures' (Stacey, 1996). Western family arrangements are diverse, fluid, and unresolved and: 'Like post-modern cultural forms, our families today admix unlikely elements in an improvisational pastiche of old and new' (Stacey, 1996:7). It is this mixture of the old and the new in relation to ideals of family life that I contend is central to how individuals 'do' family. Mixing and matching nostalgic ideas of traditional family life with modern ideas that recognise equality and individual needs, is said to be representative of contemporary family life. However, this pastiche of old and new is set within many structural and social constraints, and therefore family life, as it now exists, contains many elements of continuity as well as change (Williams, 2004). This study aims to further the understanding of how social changes affect the experience and

practice of older women making visible the implications for different cohorts and generations.

### **'The Family', demographic and socio-cultural change**

The twentieth century created a world in which the rate of social, cultural, scientific and technological change appeared to accelerate as the century progressed. 'The family', with its individual members as its main actors, is also subject to change. Different cohorts and generations will have very diverse views of what constitutes family life and how individual members should behave within it. My grandmother's way of life and her understanding of her role as a grandmother was very unlike mine. Certainly my way of dressing, for example in wearing jeans, and what I expect to be able to do as a woman in my mid fifties, such as going to the gym, returning to education, travelling abroad and travelling alone, would probably seem outrageous to my grandmother, who would never set foot outside the door without her hat and gloves, even in the summer.

The concept of 'the family' appears to be something that is quite tangible to most people, providing something to strive towards and giving purpose and meaning to everyday lives. Family life for many people can signify feelings such as belonging, stability, security and a sense of continuity. Add to this the adage that 'the family comes first' and it is clear that the notion of 'the family' appears to be central to many people's lives. In contrast to this positive view of 'the family' it has for several decades been argued that the family is in decline. Demographic trends show that there is a reduction in the numbers of children growing up in a family with two parents, falling from 92 per cent



in 1971, to 74 per cent in 2000-01 (Office for National Statistics, 2002a). Couples are tending to co-habit rather than marry. The number of cohabitating men and women who are single is projected to increase by 130 per cent between 1996 and 2021 (Office for National Statistics, 2002a). However, nearly three-quarters of never married, childless people under thirty-five who are co-habiting expected to marry each other, thus cohabitation has replaced the long engagement and is part of the process of getting married and not a substitute for marriage (Office for National Statistics, 2002a). There is an increase in the proportion of parents bringing up children alone, either through choice or divorce, reaching a figure of 26 per cent in 2000-01, which is three times higher than that in 1971. It has been estimated that in England and Wales 28 per cent of children living in married couple families will experience divorce in their family before reaching the age of sixteen. People are marrying and having children later and have fewer children with many more individuals never marrying and living alone (Office for National Statistics, 2002a).

There appears to be a case to argue that in modern societies we are witnessing a long-term trend towards increased individualism and a weakening of traditional family ties. However, in view of the large numbers of remarriages, and the reformation of reconstituted families, it could be argued that it is not the idea of marriage and 'the family' per se that has not lost its appeal. Rather, it is particular relationships in the dissolved marriage that are found to be unsatisfactory (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995) and perhaps a greater willingness to end unhappy marriages.

The term 'family', then, is one which is constantly referred to in everyday life but which can have multiple meanings depending on the context in

which it is used and the personal interpretation it has for the individuals concerned. It can be used as a noun, 'our family', or as an adjective as in family practices, family life, family values, family obligations; we can have a family or be a family. But when does a group of people become a family? How is a family measured? Where does it begin and where does it end? Common usage of the word 'family' might refer to the two-generation family of mother, father, children, what is referred to as the nuclear family. However, 'family' might also be understood to include wider kin, including aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents, what is generally referred to as the extended family. Further, a one-parent family of, for example, a mother and children, will refer to themselves as a family. Family may also be made up of same sex partners; it may include friends who are given 'adopted' family names such as 'aunty', and for some it may extend to pets.

What people mean by 'family', therefore, varies immensely, both for individuals and society generally. A family and what it means to individual members changes over time. As Judith Stacey argues, the modern family system has been replaced by 'the post-modern family condition' which she describes as a pluralistic, fluid and contested domain in which diverse family patterns, values and practices contend for legitimacy and resources (1996:7). She has suggested that family diversity and fluidity are now 'normal' and the post-modern family condition opens the possibility of egalitarian, democratic forms of intimacy as well as potentially threatening levels of insecurity (Stacey, 1996). Notions of fluidity, democracy and insecurity, and the ambiguities these factors may bring about, are elements of family life that I take up and work with in this study.

There are, then, many social and structural factors that might impact on older women as grandmothers affecting the ways in which they adapt to and make sense of family life. A combination of factors such as class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, divorce, health and social mobility will all in some way shape an individual's expectations of the grandmother/grandchild relationship. Variables such as the age of grandmother and grandchild, numbers of grandchildren, the nature of the relationship with the parents of the child, linked to the already mentioned differences, have a further influence on the quality and character of the relationship.

Just as the structure of the family is changing, so is the population as a whole. Demographic changes and social trends impact on family life and therefore on inter-generational relationships within it. People are generally living longer, with women living longer than men (Arber and Ginn, 1991); women are having their first born child later in life (Office for National Statistics, 2002b); and fertility rates are dropping (Ermisch, 1990). These factors have led some researchers to argue that today's grandparents will have set their own children on course to independent living by the time they become grandparents and therefore grandparenthood will not generally overlap with active stages of parenthood (Hagestad, 1985). The result of such changes is that families will become vertical with a trend to declining horizontal extensions of families (Szinovacz, 1998). An exception to this trend is that parents of teenage mothers may well have to care for their daughter and grandchild together (Tunaley, 1998).

It is estimated that about 94% of middle-aged and older people with children become grandparents (Smith et al., 1988; Roberto, 1990; Kornhaber, 1996). Perceptions of grandmothers are that they are 'old' women; in reality, however, the average age of becoming a

grandmother in Britain is fifty years of age (Smith and Cowie, 1991). It would seem reasonable to assume, therefore, that for grandmothers and their grandchildren this relationship has the potential to last over a considerable number of years and to be a particularly meaningful one. Such changes can mean that grandmothers are likely to spend some twenty five years or more, approximately a third of their life span, in this role (Smith and Cowie, 1991). Increased longevity has resulted in unprecedented numbers of grandparents living long enough to see their grandchildren into adulthood (Hagestad, 1985; Kornhaber, 1996). Thus for many people grand parenthood offers the possibility of a long term relationship which goes through many stages and is therefore likely to become an important part of the life course.

More women are working throughout the life course (DeGraff and Anker, 1999), with the possible consequence that grandmotherhood may not be experienced as a separate stage or phase in life for many women. At the same time public child care facilities appear not to be meeting demand, and this, together with the prohibitive costs of child care for many working families, creates the potential for child care to fall on extended family members (Thomson, 1995; Dench and Thomson, 1999). Over the last few decades the high divorce rate, too, has brought in its wake an increased need for both financial and emotional support from wider family members (McGlone et al., 1998). However, the flip side of the coin is that in certain cases divorce brings with it the potential for breakdown or conflict within wider kin relations<sup>2</sup> (Hilton and Macari, 1997; Dench and Thomson, 1999).

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<sup>2</sup> Several organisations have been set up to meet the growing problem of grandparents being denied access to their grandchildren. The Grandparent's

A further demographic trend that may affect the quality of the grandmother/grandchild relationship is as people have become increasingly mobile, both for reasons of availability of work and also through matters of choice, for example in retirement. Thus geographical distances between extended family members may increase.

Demographic evidence relating to increased geographical mobility of the population (Office for National Statistics, 2002a) can create distance between extended family members, and would seem to suggest that relations between extended family relations will weaken. Studies of inter-generational relationships have repeatedly found that geographic distance between grandparent and grandchild affects the relationship, that is the closer they live to each other the greater the contact and the closer the relationship (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986). However, such data tends to make negative assumptions concerning the possibility of relationships existing over considerable distances. The resourcefulness of families in keeping relationships alive is ignored. Many immigrant families have for several generations found ways of keeping in touch with relations in their home country through story telling, family albums and extended visits. Recent technological changes in global communications and improved transport would appear to offer further opportunities for new and innovative means of communication.

The problems facing older people are also changing. It is now well established that the population of people aged sixty-five and over in Britain has risen dramatically and will continue to do so. The population of elderly people is projected to rise to 11.4 million in 2025 becoming 19% of the total population (Ermisch, 1990). With the increased numbers of older people, and fewer younger people to provide for pensions in the future (Ermisch, 1990), there is a very real problem

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Federation was launched in 1987 in Great Britain to help lobby for grandparents to be allowed access through the law.

looming for many older people. They may be forced to work longer and may not be able to have the kind of material benefits they hoped for in old age. Such demographic trends have prompted concerns about health and retirement pension provision (Ermisch, 1990), but very little interest has been shown in how such changes might impact on grandmothers who might still be working in order to provide for themselves, but may be also expected to act as providers of care for the younger generation. As people are living longer, younger grandmothers may also be expected to care for their parents in old, old age.

People's attitudes towards, and expectations of, ageing are also subject to change (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1993). People in their middle-age and old-age are fitter than in the past and report that they do not *feel* old in perhaps the same way as past generations did (Thompson et al., 1990). Although ageing is an inevitable process, how we experience it is affected by many variables such as gender, class, cohort, culture, ethnicity and health. While traditionally older women were often expected to offer care in family crisis, attitudes and expectations of later life are changing. For some women later life may offer the chance for a change of direction and a degree of freedom from family ties (Rose, 2000). They may wish to take up opportunities for different patterns of employment or forms of self-fulfilment such as returning to education, as I did. The University of the Third Age, travel, sport and leisure pursuits are all features of the 'new' physically and socially active old age (Andrews, 1999). For women, in particular, later life can be a time of relaxation and escape from the many cultural restrictions placed on them in their younger years (Greer, 1992; Rose, 2000). Mid to later-life, then, can be a time to reflect and act to make changes and take new directions rather than being tied into old expectations associated with women's more traditional caring roles.

## **Changes in women and children's lives**

Undoubtedly one of the major changes in family life is in women's attitudes and expectations. Traditional gender roles are being challenged with the majority of young women now expecting to work outside the home and return to work after having children (Office for National Statistics, 2002a). Many women choose not to marry, preferring to co-habit, and for those who do marry marriage may no longer be for life (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998). It is recognised that women's increased involvement in work outside the home over the past fifty years has altered the financial and power dynamics in many households<sup>3</sup>, and these factors, together with shifts in marital relationships<sup>4</sup> and family formations<sup>5</sup>, have impacted on family life.

Children's rights have also begun to be recognised. The law now acknowledges their rights as individuals (Children Act, 1989; General Assembly of the United Nations, 1989). In the case of divorce, for example, rather than children simply being regarded as dependents of their parents, a situation which prioritises the rights and interests of parents or guardians over those of children, the views of children are now being sought by the courts in making decisions about custody and access (Brannen and O'Brien, 1995; Brannen and O'Brien, 1996). Our ideas about what constitutes 'childhood' are constantly changing, thus affecting our behaviour towards our children and our expectations of and for them (Jenks, 1996). Children are dependent for longer, staying

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of shifts in the ways in which family income is now generated and the inadequacy of the patriarchal model of traditional gender ideologies and family structures see (Eichler, 1980; Eichler, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Ideas of the 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1992) and 'disclosing intimacy' (Jamieson, 1998) and 'individualization' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995) as new forms of intimate relations which are no longer based on traditional ideas of duty and obligation will be considered in the analysis.

<sup>5</sup> Ideas of diversity in families that are represented by reconstituted families, single parent families and same sex partners with children (Smart and Neale, 1999) and the post-modern family no longer fixed but fluid and multidimensional (Stacey, 1996) are

in education for more years than their parent's generation. Risk anxiety (rather than the 'real' risk) attached to being in public spaces in modern society (Jackson and Scott, 1999) also means that children are now taken most places by car and play either in the home or under supervision rather than playing in the street or walking to school as their parents might have done. Changes in our understandings of the risks attached to living in a modern society can result in families making adjustments to the ways they function in their everyday lives something that may have implications for the wider family.

It is clear, therefore, that changes in women and children's lives have had significant implications for family life. A great deal of media and political rhetoric speaks of a decline in social obligations between family members linking this to women's increased involvement in the world of work and their changing attitudes to marriage. The responsibility for the supposed demise of the family is often directly, or indirectly, placed on the shoulders of women in general and feminists in particular (Stacey, 1996). It is my contention that although family life has undoubtedly undergone significant change, both in terms of its structure and practices, such *change* does not necessarily equate with *decline* in the sense of the lessening of an ethic of care between family members. For many people as they grow older, family relationships remain an important aspect of their lives (Phillipson et al., 2002).

Individuals may have varied experiences and opportunities throughout their life course thus different cohorts may hold diverse attitudes and values. People's attitudes may also alter as they become part of a different generation and their perspective on 'the family' changes.

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brought into the discussion.



Feminist studies have examined the ways in which the ideology of 'the family' reinforces gender inequalities (Firestone, 1971; Millett, 1977; Oakley, 1979; Barrett, 1980; Barrett and MacIntosh, 1982; Walby, 1990; Nicholson, 1993) raising a multiplicity of issues; for example, examining women's unpaid work in the home and re-defining it as 'work' (Oakley, 1974; Oakley, 1976). Over the last half century women have made progress towards equality with men by increasingly becoming involved in the public world of work (Hochschild, 1989) and, on the statutes at least, gaining rights to equal opportunities in the work place (Equal Pay Act, 1969) and more rights and protection for women wanting to divorce (Divorce Reform Act, 1969). Traditional gendered roles of the woman taking care of the family and the home and the man as 'bread-winner' earning the family wage are no longer the norm (Grint, 1991).

Although there have undoubtedly been many changes in women's lives over the past thirty years, what often appears to go unnoticed is just how many aspects of family life, particularly for women, remain the same. Women retain primary responsibility for the bulk of childcare and housework added to which they now have the responsibilities associated with employment (Arber and Ginn, 1995b). The role of mother does not appear to have lost its appeal (Johnson, 1988) with many women now choosing to have children on their own. Feminist research has made visible the vast amount of caring work that women carry out, usually unrecognised and for no monetary reward (Finch and Groves, 1982; Finch and Groves, 1983; Abel and Nelson, 1990; Bagipole, 1996; Merrill, 1997). Remarkably little research appears to examine the *constancy* of caring within family life and in particular the gendered nature of such commitment to, and involvement with, the emotional labour that distinguishes family life from many other social relations.

Feminism has undoubtedly contributed to changing perceptions about family life and has been responsible, to some extent, for changes in the ways in which many younger women now live their lives. For many women such structural and ideological changes mean that they are able to live more independent lives, their status no longer always defined in relation to their fathers, husbands or children. The transformations that have taken place in women's everyday lives, particularly the increased numbers of women working, have brought about greater demand for satisfactory and affordable childcare. Grandmothers continue to be regarded as a source of childcare for working mothers (Hagestad, 1985; Witherspoon and Prior, 1991; Thomson, 1995; McGlone et al., 1996; Bryson et al., 1999); therefore, there could be a potential for conflict here.

How the changes in younger women's lives might impact on the lives of older women does not seem to have attracted much attention. We should ask whether grandmothers identify with contemporary ideas of women working outside the home or traditional ideas of choosing to stay within the confines of the home to care for a third generation. There would seem to be the possibility of a problem arising in reconciling the needs of two different generations of women. Younger women, who have taken on board feminist ideals of women gaining equality and independence, could possibly be achieving their freedom and autonomy at the expense of older women being denied theirs! Older women may be prevented from seeking their own opportunities for independence by feeling obliged to take on the responsibility for the care of their grandchildren in order to allow their own daughters or daughters-in-law equal opportunities. What it means to be a grandmother in such confusing times therefore seems to be a question that requires further investigation.

## Living for 'the family' or 'a life of one's own'?<sup>6</sup>

Traditionally, kinship relations, such as those between a grandmother and her grandchildren, were understood to be a fundamental part of family life, with becoming a grandmother being seen as a major life transition for many older women. What this study seeks to discover is whether such kinship ties continue to have any significant meaning as we move into the twenty-first century. It is clear that cohorts that are separated by several decades may be poles apart in their understandings of what constitutes family life and the roles within it. Such differences in perspectives and meaning will also affect expectations of what constitutes extended family relations. An important factor that needs to be addressed when discussing being a grandmother in contemporary society is how older women will make sense of the seemingly opposing positions; that is, between identifying with 'traditional' ideals of a woman's place as being family orientated and home based, or late modern notions which value individualism, self-sufficiency and consumerism. How might the kind of fond memories I have of the role my grandmother played in my life conflict with today's late modern society in which it is argued that family life no longer follows any fixed patterns?

The socio-cultural and demographic changes mentioned above affect all aspects of family life and therefore impact on grandmothers too. In order to understand the place of grandmothers within contemporary family life, Morgan's ideas of 'family practices'<sup>7</sup> as being representative of the ways in which people 'do' family informs the discussion. The study takes the position that family life does not exist in isolation from

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<sup>6</sup> This phrasing is taken from (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Morgan argues that when we refer to family life it is as something that we do; we are referring to 'family practices' which should 'serve to underline the argument that family is not a thing without denying that notions of 'family' are important parts of the ways in which people understand and structure their lives' (Morgan, 1996:11).

society and is therefore always continuous with other areas of existence (Morgan, 1996); therefore, the ways in which social changes have impacted on the part played by grandmothers in today's families is fundamental to the discussion. This study aims to highlight the many ways in which older women as grandmothers respond to these changes (Rice, 2004).

As will become clear from the literature reviewed in the next chapter, many grandmothers play a vital part in supporting and maintaining various aspects of everyday, contemporary family life (Dench et al., 1999; Clarke and Roberts, 2003); for the most part, what is generally understood by the term 'a family' includes multi-generational ties. An ethics of caring for and about individual family members still appears to exist (Clarke and Roberts, 2003; Williams, 2004). As this contradicts other understandings of family life, it would appear that what 'family' means at the turn of the century has multiple meanings which can often be ambiguous (Silva and Smart, 1999).

### **Conflicting views on the state of 'the family'**

If the Jeremiahs who constantly preach about the end of traditional family values and wider kinship relations are to be believed, then it would appear that there is little chance that the grandmother/grandchild relationship will have any significant meaning in contemporary society. However, in total contradiction to this view are my own observations of the ways in which my peers are closely involved with their families as grandmothers. A further inconsistency in relation to this view is the recent political emphasis being placed on the value of grandparents in the future of family life. Lord Northbourne, in a debate on the role of grandparents in the House of Lords (Hansard, 1997-1998), put forward grandparents as ideal providers of 'dedicated time' that children need to

succeed in families where both parents are working and, therefore, as he sees it, are not able to provide 'committed, loving adult time'. Time was something that he argued that grandparents had to spare and would be willing to give to their grandchildren. A most important add-on to Lord Northbourne's statement about grandparents' willingness to give time was that 'they will do so at no cost to either the parents or the taxpayer' (Hansard, 1997-1998: col. 1164). Viscount Brentford in the same debate made a plea for the government to say to grandparents: 'Grandparents, come out of the woodwork. We need you. You are important' (Hansard, 1997-1998: col. 1171). The government in the consultation paper *Supporting Families* (Home Office, 1998) encourages grandparents, and other relatives, to play a more positive role in the lives of their families even putting forward the notion that 'the state will pay for grandparents to baby sit' (Bentham, 1998). Contained within this account is the assumption that grandparents have a moral and emotional attachment to their grandchildren and children that can be called upon. Such political rhetoric contrasts with notions of a post-modern society as one consisting of individuals who are simply 'out for themselves'.

Family life is the foundation on which our communities, our society and our country are built. Families are central to this Government's vision of a modern and decent country. They are as important now as they have ever been. But families are also under considerable stress. As ever it is a hard job to be a parent. More marriages end in divorce. More children are brought up in lone-parent families. Government could not turn the clock back even if it wanted to do so. There never was a golden age of the family. Family life has changed – and changed for good reasons as well as bad (Secretary of State Jack Straw as cited in Home Office, 1998).

In view of the current recognition that family life is undergoing many

changes and the political outpourings decrying the end of so called 'traditional' family values, it is surprising that many of the social policies implemented over the past two decades seem to rely on the idea that family members do care for and about each other<sup>8</sup>. Governments of both the Left and Right have attempted to reverse previous policies which had made the state more accountable for providing help in caring for families in such areas as health, childcare and the care of people in their old age. Under the leadership of Tony Blair, 'the family' has taken on a new importance and come under the scrutiny of many government departments and at the centre of much government policy<sup>9</sup>. The current policy of placing the responsibility for the care of individuals in the community, together with the constant call for a 'return to family values' of the New Right and New Labour, position the family as 'the right and proper place' for family members to look for care and support (National Health Service and Community Care Act, 1990). Taking the 'traditional' family as its ideal, recent government policies, therefore, continue to make assumptions about the willingness of extended family members to feel a 'natural' sense of obligation and responsibility towards kin. This assumption seems to be problematic if the constant reference to the decline of family values is to be believed.

Taking the family as a resource to turn to in times of need, Grandparents are valorised as 'ideal' carers for children of working mothers and providing continuity and stability in families following divorce (Family Policy Studies Centre, 2000). It could be argued that grandmothers are being targeted as a 'natural', plentiful and cheap resource to fill the gaps being left by the state in caring for its subjects.

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<sup>8</sup> The family features heavily as a resource from which to draw on for individuals in *The National Health Service and Community Care Act* (1990), *Children Act* (1989).

<sup>9</sup> For an outline of the ways in which government departments are involved with the family, see The Family Policy Studies Centre, briefing paper 12 *Family Change: Guide to the Issues* (2000).

In linking these two issues, and applying them to older women's lives, there would appear to be some possibility for conflict. If indeed sociological and political assumptions are correct regarding the steady decline in family values and a lessening of kinship ties, and there is a move towards individualistic rather than collective attitudes to family and community, this situation seems to contradict policies that place the family as the 'right and proper place' to go for help. With the increasing numbers of individuals who live alone, and those who choose not to have children, it also needs to be recognised that not everyone has a family to care for or about them. The ways in which grandparents interact with their grandchildren, and what being a grandparent means to individuals within families, is an area of research that appears to be of relevance considering the apparent importance government places on 'the family' to social life and the future of the nation.

In the light of conflicting evidence the implementation of policies based on family members caring for and about each other raises many important issues. First, do wider kinship networks exist in any meaningful way, and are their members willing to take on the work of providing 'tender loving care'? And most importantly, how does gender affect this potential caring relationship? The question of the gendered nature of such extended kinship relations is an area of family life that remains, for the most part, hidden. At this point in time, are individual family members able to carry out this caring work physically, emotionally or financially?

### **Making grandmothers visible**

The issues around care work have been addressed by feminists (Finch and Groves, 1980; Tinker, 1981; Finch and Groves, 1982; Finch and Groves, 1983; Graham, 1983) and this is something my research aims

to ask of the everyday experience of grandmothers. I have chosen to concentrate on the grandmother/grandchild relationship rather than grandparents for a number of reasons. While gender has influenced many aspects of the study of family life (Friedan, 1965; Oakley, 1976; Oakley, 1979; Finch and Groves, 1982), a feminist perspective remains under utilised where the research is focused on ageing women (Cole et al., 1993; Browne, 1998; Hooyman, 1999; Calasanti and Slevin, 2001). A 'gender lens' (Calasanti and Slevin, 2001) therefore needs to be applied to reveal all the complexities of what it means to be an ageing woman<sup>10</sup> and a grandmother. There is very limited research available that has examined the gender differences in the grandparenting experience<sup>11</sup>; however, political rhetoric which speaks about the need for 'a return to family values', when discussing the demise of family life, puts forward the importance of grandparents taking on the role of caring for their grandchildren and acting as the link to bring together fragmented families (Young, 1997). The gendered nature of caring work within families is salient in this context as it is my contention that in the same way that whenever *parents* and childcare are linked, a 'natural' slippage occurs where it becomes implicitly understood that it is mothers who will do the work. It would appear that this same assumption is made when grandparents are referred to, as it is generally understood that it is grandmothers who will carry out the everyday routine work of child-care

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<sup>10</sup> I recognize that there are many different feminist theories and that no one broad brush can be applied to feminist research methodology, however, I have used Browne's (1998) book on *Women, Feminism and Aging*, together with Ramazanoğlu and Holland's book (2002) *Feminist Methodology, Challenges and Choices* to inform my approach, which takes a feminist life course approach to the study of ageing.

<sup>11</sup> What research there is available tends to show that grandmothers are significantly more satisfied with the relationship than grandfathers (Somary and Stricker, 1998). Grandmothers reported high levels of responsibilities for helping with grandchildren and expressed the highest levels of satisfaction when caring for their grandchildren (Thomas, 1986a). Further, from the limited research that has examined the grandparent/grandchild relationship, the grandmother/grandchild relationship is said to be the closest (Somary and Stricker, 1998; Uhlenberg and Hamill, 1998). Research carried out into the provision of childcare when mothers of young children return to work also shows that grandmothers are the preferred carers (Hagestad, 1985; Eisenberg, 1988; Witherspoon and Prior, 1991; Thomson, 1995; McGlone et al., 1996; Bryson et al., 1999).



(Dench et al., 1999; Eden, 2000; Rice, 2004). My initial reading of the available literature on the subject (see chapter 2), both in the form of official government statistics and sociological research on kinship and the family, indicates a general lack of useful qualitative information concerning the experience and practice of grandmothing. It would appear, therefore, that the paucity of such research in Britain renders the role of grandmother's almost invisible within most studies of family life over the last two or three decades. This has come about because of the acceptance of the importance of the nuclear family as the model of family life and the assumption that extended family relations were no longer of importance to many family members. But, importantly, what needs to be discovered is how older women construct meaning out of the various facets of their lives and how *being* a grandmother fits into their understanding of the self. What are the expectations and aspirations of women as they age?

### *Representations of grandmothers*

Much common sense understanding of what it is to be a grandmother is based on often outdated and unfounded representations in the media and popular culture. The nostalgic image of a grandmother is just one such representation. It is based on notions of an ageing, family-centred woman who has nothing else to do in her life but 'always be there' for her grandchildren. Mary Vorse wrote in her autobiography, published in 1911, of a conversation she overheard in which a young woman, Eleanor, bemoaned the decline of the 'real grandmother' whom she described as a woman who is always there whenever grandchildren should want or need her. Vorse wrote:

When an older woman is 'always there' depend upon it, there is some deeper reason and a sadder one than that she was waiting for her little grandchildren... Each generation permits a different type of young girl, but the older woman must not change.... She must be like Eleanor's

grandmother, 'always there' – waiting, waiting, with a smiling face through the long, quiet, empty hours, for her grandchildren to come home....I hope I shall fall short of this ideal in all respects. I do not wish to become a mere ornamental nonentity about whom people shall say, 'what a sweet old lady'... (Vorse, as quoted in Thompson et al., 1990: 175).

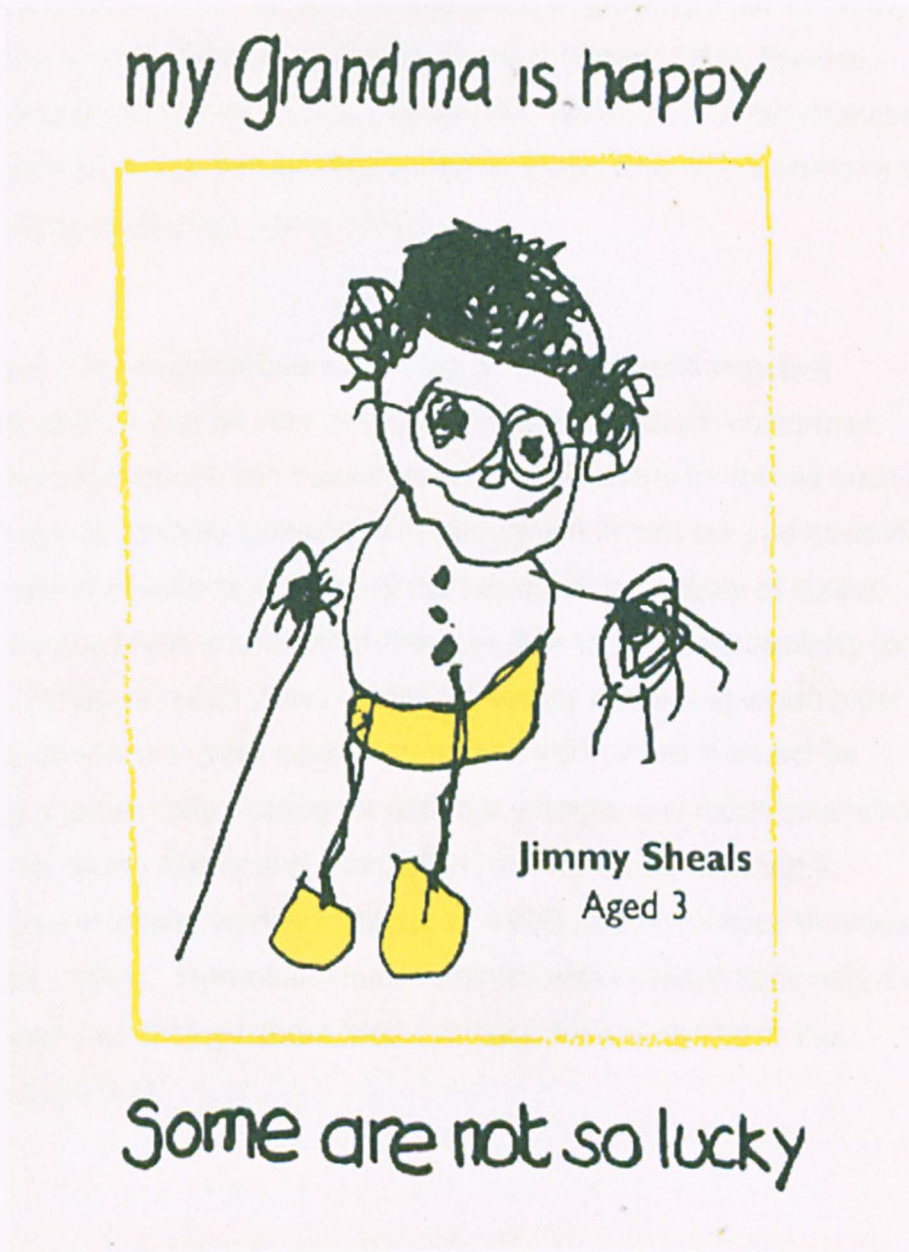
The anger that Vorse felt about the assumptions being made within this passage could still hold true today. The sentence 'each generation permits a different type of girl, but the older woman must not change' still appears relevant today. Much political and media rhetoric seems to base their ideas about the role of grandmothers on Eleanor's romantic views of grandmotherhood. Grandmothers are often portrayed as caring, nurturing, altruistic women whose only concern is the continuation and success of the family. Young, active, working grandmothers are nowhere to be seen. What is most common in representations of white western grandmothers is that they are seen as being old, past it, in decline, no longer engaged in the mainstream of society. They are portrayed as women who can only gain their pleasure out of living their life through helping to meet the needs of others. Such culturally specific representations of the grandmother tend to contain images that may be more in keeping with the 19<sup>th</sup> century rather than the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Smith and Cowie, 1991). Indeed, such images may never have been accurate. Many working class older women may have had to work throughout their lives and rarely had time to themselves or time to sit and contemplate the lives of others.

It is my contention that the way in which certain groups such as grandmothers are represented is important. For any group of individuals being portrayed in stereotypical ways can bring about certain limiting assumptions concerning the kinds of roles they are able to undertake, and determine the nature of the relationship with others outside that

particular group (Dyer, 1993). The stereotypical image of a grandmother is of an old woman with grey hair, wearing a cardigan, sitting in a chair and knitting; and even an affectionate child's eye view draws attention to her infirmities (see Illustration 2) However, as feminist writers argue, gender as an important factor is not addressed in many cases (Arber and Ginn, 1991; Bernard and Meade, 1993; Finch and Mason, 1993; Bytheway, 1995; Browne, 1998; Bernard et al., 2000; Calasanti and Slevin, 2001); adding to negative cultural representations of older women, generally speaking the medical profession and social services tend to pathologise 'ageing' making assumptions that problematise the experiences of older women (Harrison, 1983; Arber and Ginn, 1991; Bernard and Meade, 1993); and older women are often portrayed as "in need of care" and essentially a drain on the family and society (Bernard and Meade, 1993; Arber and Ginn, 1995a; Bytheway, 1995).

Gerontology as a discipline has tended to produce theories that associate the ageing process with disengagement from society (Cumming and Henry, 1961), declining health, role loss, poverty and exclusion. The result being loss of self-esteem and feeling devalued by other younger members of society being central to such understandings. However, gender and ageing as two interlinking factors are often not taken into consideration. Being female is often equated with reproduction, caring and nurturing, passivity, non-competitiveness and dependency which age does nothing to improve. It would appear that when a woman ages incompetence, uselessness, both in terms of reproduction and wealth production, and unattractiveness are added to already negative concepts of femininity. As Susan Sontag argues, there is a 'double standard of ageing'. Within western society the normal signs of ageing that are inscribed on every human face penalize women much more heavily than men (Sontag, 1978 [1972]). Further,

**Illustration 2 Child's Eye View of a Grandmother**



**Child's Line Drawing of a Grandmother  
Help the Aged Donations Envelope (1999)**

compliance with what Itzin (1990) describes as 'female chronology', based on motherhood and marriage, can leave many women feeling socially devalued as early as fifty, that is once their role as mother has come to an end (Itzin, 1990). Grandmotherhood has been seen by some researchers as one way of countering such feelings of loss (Kornhaber and Woodward, 1981), while others argue that growing older for many women is a time of increased life satisfaction (Greer, 1992; Friedan, 1993) and greatest productivity (Neugarten, 1979), with better chances of a positive old age being experienced by those who do not conform to 'the female chronology' (Itzin, 1990).

It is clear that the consequences of being identified with negative representations can be very damaging for the individuals concerned. Such representations can have important implications for issues such as self-image, autonomy, power and control which in turn put into question fundamental questions of whether the individual is capable of taking care of themselves and whether they are able to take responsibility for others. However, such views ignore the variety of ways in which older women are often in paid work, or in unpaid work where they act as 'society's carers' often caring for both the younger and older generations within the family (Arber and Ginn, 1991) as well as contributing to society as voluntary workers (Bagipole, 1996) and as 'cultural trustees' (Schuller, 1996). How older women identify with or resist such negative stereotypes as they go about their everyday lives is central to this research project.

## **Theoretical Approach**

The theoretical approach my research takes is informed by the work of sociologist Dorothy Smith in seeing the everyday world as problematic (Smith, 1988). The study is taken from the standpoint of the women, in this case older women as grandmothers, recognising the importance of hearing their everyday stories in furthering our understanding of what it *means* to be a grandmother at this particular point in time. Throughout the analysis the everyday experiences of grandmothers within their familial situations, together with the social context in which they live, will be brought into the discussion. Following Smith, I intend to look at their lives from where they are 'located, embodied, in the local historicity and particularities of their lived worlds' (Smith, 1988:8). This study makes links between past and present understandings of families and kinship relations overlaid with gender and ageing as two factors that impact in different ways on experience and practice. Following the feminist gerontologist Collette Browne's (1998) work and others (see also Bernard and Meade, 1993; Bernard et al., 2000; Calasanti and Slevin, 2001) throughout the discussion, a 'gendered lens' will be applied to the data in order to question and bring under scrutiny many often taken for granted 'common sense' assumptions concerning women's lives and ageing. This study takes a feminist life course approach thus keeping focused an overall gender perspective while recognising the necessity of making links backwards and forwards in time when analysing the experience of older women (Bernard and Meade, 1993; Browne, 1998; Bernard et al., 2000; Calasanti and Slevin, 2001). A life course perspective provides a framework that emphasizes the inter-linkage between different phases of an individual's life and 'explores women's oppression, diversities and strengths' and provides 'a mode of analysis that is based on a definition of old age from women's lived experience' (Browne, 1998:xxxv).

This study aims to provide a view of contemporary family life from the perspective of older women as grandmothers, and, through an analysis of their stories, determine whether being a grandmother plays a significant part in this group of older women's lives<sup>12</sup>. Is being a grandmother a definitive role involving a set of practices, or is 'grandmother' simply a title symbolising a transitional stage in older women's lives? Is being a grandmother a primary feature of their identity, or is it secondary to other, more vital, aspects of what they consider constitutes their sense of self?

### **Structure of the thesis**

The aim of this thesis, then, is to further the understanding of what it means to be a grandmother at the turn of the century. The research aims to situate individual women's everyday experiences of 'grandmotherhood' within wider debates surrounding family, gender, ageing, demographic and socio-cultural change. Chapter Two conducts a review of the relevant literature thus placing the debate about grandmothers and their grandchildren in the context of wider sociological theories examining changing approaches to kinship relations, gender and ageing over the past fifty years.

In Chapter Three I set out the methodological approach, the research process, and how I arrived at the research questions. I reflect upon the ethical problems of conducting a feminist research project as one that aims to empower women while acknowledging the possibility of unequal power relations existing between the researcher and the researched

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<sup>12</sup> I use the term 'older women' throughout the thesis to describe this group of women for ease of reference, although their ages range from 42 years of age to 82 years. Defining when a person becomes 'old' is a contentious issue, most usually associated with retirement age, therefore, the majority of the grandmothers in this study would not be defined as 'old' even using retirement as a measurement of when a person becomes 'old'.

(Reinharz, 1992; Mason, 1996; Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002). This chapter highlights pertinent issues of following a feminist life course perspective to the study that brings together a multi-disciplinary approach linking together of gender, ageing, personal biography and historical time (Browne, 1998; Bernard et al., 2000; Calasanti and Slevin, 2001).

Chapter Four makes the participants visible giving a general overview of the sample, what they do and how they organize their time. Following on from this basic outline, Chapter Five looks at what grandmothers do and examines the family circumstances that impact on their lives as grandmothers. Chapter Six moves on to examine the experience of *being* a grandmother bringing into view the women's subjective understanding of grandmotherhood. The women's particular ways of understanding the self in relation to their families are set within an historical and social context and current discourses of motherhood. The question of whether grandmothers follow what is traditionally connected with female identity or characteristics associated with today's late/post-modern individuals<sup>13</sup> is raised.

Chapter Seven theorises the self in relation to grandmothers as older women having a different understanding of time, both in the sense of time passing and growing older and in the sense of time as a precious family resource (Davies, 1990). This chapter discusses the complexity of the grandmother experience both in the management of their everyday lives and in their construction of their identity. Chapter Eight concludes the thesis by summarising the research findings; reflecting on

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<sup>13</sup> This notion is based on an understanding that the emergence of a 'post-modern individual' brings with him/her changes in the nature of social and moral ties that bind individuals. In particular, women's increased participation in paid employment and feminist politics are said to combine to produce changes in women's expectations within family life (Stacey, 1991; Beck, 1992; Stacey, 1996).



the research process and demonstrating how my research contributes to the field of knowledge in Women's Studies, Family Studies and Gerontology about what it means to be a grandmother at this point in time.

# **Chapter 2**

## **A Review of the Literature:**

### **Grandmothers in a changing social world**

This chapter aims to uncover what is currently known about the role of grandmother and how women come to terms with this transition in the life course. In order to paint a full picture of the existing literature on grandmothers and their roles within families it is necessary to look at work from Sociology, Psychology, Feminism and Gerontology. Taking information from these different areas of research renders a somewhat fragmented picture, as each of these broad areas of study adopts a range of methodological and theoretical approaches, asking distinct questions, and often making conflicting knowledge claims. However, I will attempt to provide an overview of the research findings and the different theoretical and methodological approaches to this subject area. Through the process of doing the literature review, together with my personal observations, certain questions have emerged as being central to providing a more complete picture of the experience and practice of grandmothers. The chapter concludes by setting out what I have identified as being the critical research questions that will form the parameters of this study.

#### **Family and kinship studies**

An awareness of the changing patterns, practices and meanings of family and kinship relations is fundamental to understanding grandmotherhood. In order to locate grandmothers within the context of today's families I will begin by reviewing family and kinship studies examining family change. I will then go on to look more specifically at studies of grandmothers, and to complete the picture, the changing position of the child within families. As I have already raised in the introduction, this study is placed within the context of much theorising and research findings that speak about the 'end of family values', and

the 'death of the family' (Popenoe, 1988). For nearly fifty years, sociology, with a few notable exceptions (Townsend, 1957; Young and Wilmott, 1957; Cunningham-Burley, 1985; Brubaker, 1990; Morgan, 1996; McGlone et al., 1998; Dench et al., 1999; Bengston, 2001), has denied the importance of the extended family. Initially the nuclear family of post-industrialisation was seen as the norm (Parsons and Bales, 1955; Goode, 1964). This family consists of a heterosexual couple with children living within a single household, a form that was argued to be 'functional' for both the needs of industry and the family (Parsons, 1952). A more contemporary view is that even the nuclear family is declining in importance. As Anthony Giddens argues: 'In the industrial countries, family life has changed so much that there can be no route back to the traditional family as it is ordinarily understood' (Giddens, 2000:46). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue that the home and family life have become a battleground between the sexes as a result of the process of individualisation and in particular women's changing needs and expectations (Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Marriage is no longer for life and traditional gender roles are being challenged. According to this view of family life, it is no longer exemplified by duty and obligations to kin rather individuals are concerned with personal autonomy and self-expression.

Complexity and diversity are now the terms more usually associated with today's families (Haskey, 1995; Bernardes, 1997; Cheal, 2002). The idea of 'a family' is not something restricted to the confines of one household, or contained within the boundaries of the so-called 'nuclear', two generational family model, but is something that exists in a broader, looser, more fluid sense. Single parents, same sex partners, divorced and re-married partners are all part of the complex picture of how today's families are formed. However, 'family', in this less fixed, less idealised model, remains central to many people's everyday lives (Morgan, 1996; Silva and Smart, 1999; Williams, 2004). However, although family composition has generally become more diverse in

recent decades, to some extent the current trend towards diversity is remarkable only because of the contrast with a period of unusual uniformity during the 1950s (Jackson, 1999).

Family complexity refers not only to family composition but also the diverse ways in which families 'do' family life. It is now generally recognised that how people *do* family life is not something that remains static but is fluid and dynamic. David Morgan's idea of family practices<sup>14</sup> sees 'family' as representing 'a constructed quality of human interaction or an active process rather than a thing-like object of detached social investigation' (Morgan, 1999:16). Families change, break down and reform with attitudes constantly being adjusted and reflected upon. However, it is possible to overstate the degree of fluidity and change in family life, particularly if gender is taken as a variable. For many women the bulk of the responsibilities associated with family life, particularly in relation to housework and the care of children, remain constant (Chambers, 1986; Hochschild, 1989; Seymour, 1992; Arber and Ginn, 1995b). Family life has always had many areas of continuity as well as change. As David Morgan argues:

It is likely that fluidity has always been part of family living; in a sense, such fluidity is a necessity not an optional extra. It is perhaps that our modes of understanding family living have come closer to realities of everyday experience and perception than some of the earlier models of functionalists or Marxists (Morgan, 1999:29).

Gender, race, ethnicity, age, health, wealth, poverty, marital status are some of the many factors that have always influenced the diverse nature and construction of family forms, and have therefore shaped individuals' different experiences of 'the family' within a specific time and place (Anderson, 1983; Afshar, 1988; Bernardes, 1997). The inclusion of wider kin too within an understanding of what 'family' consists of remains, for many people, part of this so-called 'new' idea of

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<sup>14</sup> David Morgan (1996) uses the term 'family practices' to describe family life as something that we do, arguing that practices change and adapt and I use it in the same way.

fluidity and multiplicity in relation to family life. For older women as grandmothers, their experience will depend significantly on the current understanding of family life, and the expectations of both their immediate families, and wider society. However, what is difficult to obtain is a clear picture of just what that understanding is.

The dominant view within sociology as a discipline has, since the latter half of the twentieth century, been that wider kinship networks are a thing of the past. This state of knowledge has resulted either from an over emphasis of the importance of the privatised nuclear family, or more recently, from under-theorised ideas of fluid, diverse post-modern families. Historically, despite the nuclear family supposedly being the norm, family studies in Britain have found evidence of wider kinship relations. From Young and Willmott's classic study *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957), to Clarke and Roberts recent study, *Grandparenthood: Its meaning and Its Contribution to Older People's Lives* (2003) evidence of wider kinship relations have been found<sup>15</sup>.

Young and Willmott's (1957) study of traditional working class families revealed, to their surprise, that the wider family 'far from having disappeared, was still very much alive in the middle of London' (1957:12). Their study of East End families showed that close kinship networks still existed in a variety of forms. Support with childcare (particularly between mothers and daughters) was very common as was help during family illness or other crisis. Family connections were often brought into play to provide assistance and advice in finding jobs and housing. The door was always open to family and kin to share in friendship such as popping in and out of each other's houses for a cup of tea and a chat (ibid 1957). Bringing research on kinship relations up to date, Clarke and Roberts (2003) found that nearly all of the

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<sup>15</sup> Other studies that have found evidence of meaningful wider kinship relations are (Townsend, 1957; Rosser and Harris, 1965; Firth et al., 1970; Allan, 1979; Finch, 1989; Quereshi and Walker, 1989; Finch and Mason, 1993).

grandparents in their study were involved with their grandchildren (only 0.5% never saw their grandchildren). Their data confirms that family relationships are complex, but grandparenthood remains an important family relationship for older people with 60% of grandparents looking after children under 15 years in the daytime, while 54% babysat and 64% gave money to grandchildren.

There is, then, considerable evidence to verify the notion that extended kin ties play a significant part in today's families (Finch, 1989; Quereshi and Walker, 1989; Brubaker, 1990; Thompson et al., 1990; Finch and Mason, 1993; McGlone et al., 1996; Dench and Thomson, 1999; Bengston, 2001; Clarke and Roberts, 2003). Most people maintain regular contact with relatives, with family remaining a very important source of help both practically and emotionally. There does therefore appear to be a role for grandmothers to take up in contemporary family life. The question still remains to be asked however, whether grandmothers will choose to take on this role.

### **Studies of grandmothering**

In different cultures and at different times grandmotherhood has had many different meanings. But what then is the grandmother/grandchild relationship like in today's families? Culturally, notions of what it means to be a grandmother range from grandmothers being a vital part of family life revered and imbued with spirituality<sup>16</sup>, to ideas of traditional domineering matriarchs of the past who were often seen as 'troublemakers' and therefore as a noxious influence on the mother and child (Strauss, 1943), to grandmotherhood as having a purely symbolic role and effectively having no influence at all (Kahana and Kahana, 1971).

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<sup>16</sup> See Kitzinger (1997) for a discussion on different styles and myths surrounding grandmotherhood.

In reviewing the literature it is evident that much of the research on grandparenting is based on work carried out in America, a state of affairs that has prompted Jerrome (1996) to conclude that British Gerontologists have largely ignored this area of research. Hagestad (1985) explored the changing images of grandparents in popular magazines and found that past representations of a grandmother were that she was old and worked hard for her family, 'she had a place on a pedestal and she had earned it' (1985:33). More contemporary understandings were that 'there appeared to be as many styles as there were grandmothers and grandchildren' (1985:33). From the American literature several 'types' of grandparent/grandchild relationships have emerged. Cherlin and Furstenberg (1985) found evidence of a variety of approaches to grandparenting which they termed 'companionate, involved and remote'. Neugarten and Weinstein (1964) examined grandparents' perceptions of their roles and identified different styles of grandparenting naming them as formal, fun seeker, surrogate parent, reservoir of family wisdom, or the distant figure, seeming to confirm that being a grandparent is a diverse experience.

Taking the research findings at face value there are several 'norms' associated with grandparenting that would not always appear to be consistent. The 'norm of non-interference' associated with contemporary grandparents (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986) contradicts another norm associated with grandparenting as being one of 'obligation' (Rossi and Rossi, 1990) and another of 'indulgence' (Kivnick, 1980; Kivnick, 1982). A further norm or 'ideal' model associated with grandparenting is one of being 'free from undue responsibility and discipline' (Albrecht, 1954; Fischer, 1983; Dench et al., 1999). However, it is difficult to reconcile a norm of obligation, with one of being free from responsibility. Grandparenthood is also seen as having health benefits especially for women and remaining 'involved' with kin is seen as part of a recipe for successful ageing (Kivnick, 1980; Kornhaber, 1996; Silverstein et al., 1998; Silverstein and Long, 1998).

Kivnick (1982) describes grandparents' experience of being involved with their grandchildren as one associated with warmth and pleasure, a beneficial relationship for both grandparents' and grandchildren. However, such a norm of 'involvement' seems to have the potential to conflict with a norm of 'non-interference'. The possible level of involvement depends on the different wishes and needs of each generation, and says nothing of how a diversity of attitudes and beliefs change over time, and how this might affect the style of grandparenting.

### **The child at the centre of family life**

When aiming to understand grandmothering it goes without saying that the relationship with the grandchild is central to any enquiry. Any contemporary concept or model of family life, where children are involved, places the focus on the needs of the child. Such a view is unchanging and fixed within many people's comprehension of what 'family' is. But, just as the structure of families change, and different cohorts attach different meanings to family relations, so the child at the centre of family life changes. In recent history it has been seen as the responsibility of the nuclear family to socialise the child, gradually equipping him or her with the necessary mechanisms and competences to participate in the everyday activities of their social world, eventually 'becoming' a bona fide adult member of society. This deterministic, and often functionalist framework, places the family in the role of principle agent of socialisation, exercising social control over the child. However, how children are perceived in families and ideas of childhood are culturally and historically specific (Erikson, 1950; Jenks, 1996; Gittins, 1998).

It has been argued that we have become a 'child centred' society and that the 'new vision' of the child is one in which she becomes 'the centre of love, hope, and stability' in the late/post-modern world (Jenks, 1996:106-7). The 'child' in this sense, can be said to be the



embodiment of a form of 'nostalgic' longing for times past, becoming a source of love as well as the object of love. The child, then, is understood as the site, or relocation of discourses concerning stability, integration and social bonds relating to trust and reliability, a position once held by marriage and kinship relations. The adult relationship with the child is seen as 'the most fundamental, unchosen, unnegotiated form of relationship' (Jenks, 1996:107). 'The child is the source of the last remaining, irrevocable, unchangeable primary relationship. Partners come and go. The child stays.' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995:118). An added dimension to this notion of the child-centredness of family life is the concept of parents gaining a sense of self through the child. However, it is recognised that relationships change over the life course, therefore the question of how long parents carry on placing their children at the centre of their lives, and whether grandparents accept this discourse in relation to their grandchildren, and how this might vary over time, are all issues that need to be addressed. Kahana and Kahana (1971) note that grandparenting is not static, but roles shift along a continuum of possible grandparent roles as the child's specific needs and circumstances change, and as the grandparent's age and the situation changes.

### **Grandparenting: Its role in successful ageing**

Added to the discourse of child-centredness is the notion of the grandparent/grandchild relationship representing continuity or immortality for grandparents linking with Erikson's idea of generativity set within his eight psycho-social stages of the life course (1982). Exploring Erikson's eight stages of man Kornharber adds continuity as a ninth stage that is attained and implemented by older people through a connection with others, especially grandchildren (Kornhaber, 1996); connecting those at the beginning of their life with those at the end, life's journey comes full circle, and through their input into the grandchild, grandparents are said to leave something of themselves

behind (Kivnick, 1988; Kornhaber, 1996). Erikson's (1982) idea of generativity has been taken up by several gerontologists as playing an important role in understanding an ageing identity. The virtue of generativity, according to Erikson, is 'a widening commitment to take care of the persons, the products, and the ideas one has learned to care for' (1982:67). Swilhart suggests that generativity expressed within the grandparent/grandchild relationship contributes to 'successful' ageing (Swilhart 1985 cited in Kornhaber, 1996). Kivnick (1988) also argues for a kind of 'grand-generativity' in later life, which she relates to grandparenthood. She argues that being a grandparent therefore incorporates five dimensions of meaning:

- (i) centrality – grandparenthood as central to a grandparent's current daily life;
- (ii) valued elder – passing on tradition, history and advice;
- (iii) immortality through clan – patriarchal or matriarchal responsibility, identification with grandchildren, and family immortality;
- (iv) reinvolvement with personal past – grandparent's re-experiencing their own pasts and identifying with their own grandparents; and
- (v) indulgence – grandparental attitudes to leniency, permissiveness and gratification. (Kivnick, 1988:68)

This way of seeing old age tends to see the projects of older age as being second-hand, experienced through the lives of others, and as an extension of the life-tasks of the preceding age-stage:

Rather than being an attempt at genuine confrontation with the issues of personal ageing, it seeks either to replace these with the concerns of an earlier phase or ignore them in favour of the needs of and associations with the requirements of other. (Biggs, 1993:19).

As Biggs argues, 'a closer reading of generativity itself suggests that the focus of this life course activity is to contribute to what has been called the 'generational cycle'. Generativity itself is important, in other words, because of the children' (1999:33). As Biggs (1993) argues, such a view of grandparenthood as providing meaning in older age says little about those who do not have grandchildren. It also says little about the individual's gender or age within a life course as significant factors

contributing to the experience of being a grandparent.

The role of grandparents as a valuable role for the older generation has been reported as beneficial for the younger generations too. Kivett (1991) in a review of the research on the grandparent-grandchild dyad, and the role and personal dimensions of grandparenthood, identified socialization processes, intergenerational exchanges and interactions, and the transmission of values as major factors that benefited families. To these benefits Troll (1983) adds the reward that grandchildren derive from the relationship is that grandparents can act as a connecting bridge with the middle generation.

Students of 'disengagement theory', discussed in more detail below, further argue that as people age they withdraw from mainstream life, losing the status and roles they experienced in mid-life, and family relationships become more important (Kahana and Kahana, 1971). This claim has particularly been made in relation to older women's lives. Psychologists have linked some forms of depression in older women with the 'empty nest syndrome', that is, feeling devoid of purpose once their children have left home; thus re-engaging with the maternal role through caring for grandchildren, has been seen as a curative measure. Within the prevailing psychological discourse women are portrayed as losing their identity once their children have grown and flown the nest, and therefore for some psychologists the role of grandmother is seen as helpful in fulfilling what they perceive as a physiological and psychological need to care and nurture (Neugarten, 1979; Cooper and Gutmann, 1987). Taking on the role of grandmother also conforms with the notion of successful ageing, that is, remaining active and productive in the sense that a grandmother is fulfilling a useful, and socially prescribed role, that of providing child care, thus enabling the 'productive' generation to do their job. The assumptions made about women's essential need to nurture goes unquestioned and as Biggs

argues, 'the progressive marginality of an ageing identity is cloaked in the guise of its functional value for wider social interests' (1999:33)

It is important that the gendered nature of such ideas be considered both in designing research questions and in analysing data. Other research that has *not* taken for granted the above assumptions has questioned these prescribed female roles finding no evidence of 'empty nest syndrome' (Logothetis, 1993; Apter, 1997; Richards et al., 1997). Feminist writers (Greer, 1992; Friedan, 1993; Apter, 1997) have explored the notion of middle-age and later life as being a time of freedom from the constraints of earlier years and a time for possibilities and change. It is important that certain assumptions should not be made about older women's lives, either by men in general or by members of the younger generation. It could be the case that older women are being 'naturally' placed in this caring position for the personal benefits of younger working-men and women. It also needs to be recognised that when much research refers to grandparents, particularly in relation to the care of grandchildren, it is not the joint effort of 'grandparents' that is meant, but rather grandmothers specifically. Gender as a significant factor is largely ignored.

### **The continuing importance of the grandparent/grandchild relationship**

There have been a number of American studies highlighting the continued importance of the grandparent/grandchild relationship. Long term studies have set out to systematically investigate the grandparent/grandchild relationship (Kornhaber and Woodward, 1981; Silverstein et al., 1998; Silverstein and Long, 1998; Somary and Stricker, 1998). Kornhaber and Woodward (1981) found that the grandparent/grandchild bond was second in emotional importance only to the parent/child bond; grandparents and grandchildren affected each others' lives deeply: Many grandparents did not repeat the mistakes

they made with their own children, with their grandchildren; even parents viewed their own parents as being better with grandchildren than they had been with them: Grandparenting provided many elders with meaning and joy in their lives and children who had dedicated and close grandparents were enhanced in important ways: Parents also benefited greatly when grandparents were involved with their families. Kornharber states that these findings were surprising since the popular view at the time was that many grandparents had opted out of their grandparenting roles and left the rearing of their grandchildren to the parents. However, as Kornharber notes when discussing North American families, the rapidly evolving changes in family structure and attitudes has meant that in the past thirty years there has been a steady reversal of the 'opting out' approach to grandparenting, with grandparent-headed households on the increase created by teenage pregnancy, incarcerated parents, child abuse, drug and alcohol addiction, death, divorce and illness (1981).

In Britain the recent work of Linda Clarke and Ceridwen Roberts (2003) carried out under the ESRC Growing Older Programme offers useful research providing a view of family life from the perspective of the older generation. Their survey found that one-third of grandparents were aged under 60 years and that the majority were working. Further, 38% of grandparents had grandchildren in non-intact families. They found that extended family relationships remain important for older people. The qualitative element of their study found that the contribution grandchildren made to grandparents' lives was a feeling of strong emotional closeness and a sense of continuity and immortality. They found that contact between grandparents and grandchildren was more frequent than they had expected (Clarke and Roberts, 2003).

To reiterate then, kinship relations outside the boundaries of the nuclear family clearly do exist between households and continue over several

generations (Hancock et al., 1988; Finch, 1989; Thompson et al., 1990; Finch and Mason, 1993; Bamford, 1994; Finch, 1996; Healy and Yarrow, 1997; Dench et al., 1999; Finch and Mason, 2000), and therefore that many older people saw themselves as part of multi-generational families (Dench et al 1999; Dench and Thomson, 1999). A study carried out by Age Concern found that 91% of grandparents reported the relationship with their grandchildren very rewarding and for the majority of grandparents, grandparenting was viewed favourably and was a very important part of their lives (Bamford, 1994). There is some evidence to suggest that grandparents today enjoy a closer relationship with their grandchildren than previous generations (Attias-Donfut and Segalen, 2002). A survey carried out by Age Concern found that two thirds of grandparents felt that they were more involved in the lives of their grandchildren than their parents were, and twice as many grandparents of today's generation were likely to act as childminders than the previous generation (Age Concern, 1998). Grandchildren too reported that the relationship was very meaningful, with nearly two thirds finding the love they felt for their grandparents difficult to put into words (ibid., 1998).

Retailers also recognise the importance of wider kinship relations within families with grandparents becoming a growing target for businesses selling merchandise for children and adolescents (Schlosberg, 1990). One only has to look along the shelves of any greeting card shop, at the endless number of cards to grandparents,<sup>17</sup> grandchildren, aunts, uncles, nephews and nieces, to realise the importance of the extended family to retailers as a potential market.

The Family Policy Studies Centre is also tracking changes in family life and the various policy responses to these changes. In doing this it draws together the latest statistics and research on family change and

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<sup>17</sup> Grandparent's Day has been placed on the calendar as 28<sup>th</sup> September. It is recognised as a special day alongside Mother's Day and Father's Day.

family policy, and maps the responsibilities of different government departments for different aspects of family life<sup>18</sup>. The overall view is that, although contact between extended kin may have fallen over the past few decades, the extended family has survived the major social and economic changes that have taken place. It retains an important place in peoples lives, and remains a vital source of help and support for the majority of families (McGlone et al., 1998; McGlone, 1999). Recognising the survival of the extended family and reflecting the growing interest in the role of grandparents in Britain the first National Conference on Grandparenting, '*Grandparenting in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*', took place in London in March 2000. This was organised by the Family Policy Studies Centre. Contributors were from a variety of disciplines, all investigating the complexity of issues surrounding grandparenting<sup>19</sup>.

Changes in family structure are highlighted as being of vital importance when aiming to understand the nature of kinship relations<sup>20</sup>. There is also a growing body of work on the effects of single parenthood, divorce and re-marriage on grandparent and grandchild relations (Johnson, 1985; Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986; Dench and Thomson, 1999; Drew and Smith, 1999). Dench and Thomson (1999) note that as more families are breaking down, many maternal grandparents are involved in a hands on role while paternal grandparents are all too often excluded. This more intensive level of grandparenting seems to be increasingly common as ties of marriage weaken and it has

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<sup>18</sup> See *Family Briefing Paper 12*:(Family Policy Studies Centre, 2000) for an overview of key family facts at the turn of the century.

<sup>19</sup> Speakers were: Martin Shreeve, Programme Director *Better Government for Older People*; Professor Merrill Silverstein, American Gerontologist, University of Southern California; Dr. Emily Grundy and Lynda Clarke, Centre for Population Studies; Professor Geoff Dench, Senior Research Fellow; Institute of Community Studies; Professor Richard Berthoud, Institute of Economic and Social Research; Dr. Jill Tunaley, Newcastle Centre for Family Studies; Professor Peter Smith and Linda Drew, Goldsmiths' College London with Noreen Tingle, Head of Policy for *Grandparent's Federation*; Robert Tapisfield, Chief Executive for Family Rights Group; Francis Hunt, Head of Active Age Unit, Age Concern England.

<sup>20</sup> The Centre for Research on Family, Kinship and Childhood looks at intergenerational relationships. See, in particular Carol Smart and Bren Neale's work on '*Changing Commitments: A Study of Close Kin after Divorce in England*' - *Working Paper 33* (Smart and Neale, 2004).

consequences for the levels of satisfaction experienced by grandparents. The significance of lineage, with maternal grandparents having the most contact following divorce or separation, can lead to levels of dissatisfaction for both maternal and paternal grandparents. The maternal grandparents can feel dissatisfied as a consequence of the higher levels of support required of them, and the paternal grandparents can feel distanced from their grandchildren. Dench and Thomson's findings show that 79% of maternal grandparents felt close to their grandchildren when the parents were not together, compared to 35% of paternal grandparents in the same situation, (this compared to 73% and 66% when parents were together). Somary and Stricker (1998) in their longitudinal study of the expectations and early experiences of grandparents, found that both gender and whether they were paternal or maternal grandparents affected the grandparenting experience. Grandmothers both expected to, and experienced, greater satisfaction and overall meaning in grandparenthood than grandfathers. Maternal grandparents were more satisfied in grandparenthood than they expected to be, whereas paternal grandparents were not. This situation could lead to potential conflict between generations and perhaps a resistance to a growing burden of lineage demands for one set of grandparents and exclusion for the other.

Contrary to the view that extended kin ties have less salience there is evidence to suggest that family relationships across several generations are becoming increasingly important both in North America and Britain. Bengston (2001) argues that multigenerational family relations will be more important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for three reasons: first, the demographic changes of population ageing, resulting in 'longer years of shared lives' between generations: second, the increasing importance of grandparents and other kin in fulfilling family functions: and third the strength and resilience of intergenerational solidarity over time. He also argues that family multigenerational relations are increasingly diverse



because of changes in family structure, increased longevity and diversity of intergenerational relationships or 'types' (Bengston, 2001). It is this diversity that influences the experience and practice of what it means to be a grandparent.

*Generation and cohort as factors influencing the experience of grandparenting*

The primary focus of most family studies research remains the dynamics of the parent/child relationship with little or no importance being placed on the role of the grandparental generation. Although wider kinship relations remain important in the majority of people's lives, a clear picture of what those kinship relations mean to individuals of different generations and cohorts does not emerge. The influence of prior interpersonal relations with their own parents and grandparents and their own children are also important considerations that do not come into view.

The historical or cohort effects that provide the *context* in which grandparenting is carried out are also ignored (Aldous, 1995). What does become visible, however, is a complicated and often ambiguous picture of family life. It suggests that the role of grandmother has the potential to be of importance to the younger and middle generation in providing childcare and support: it also provides grandmothers with a role, if they wish to take it up, and the potential for developing a meaningful relationship with their grandchildren. How older women manage the transition to the grandmotherhood and how they wrestle with this and the complexities of other areas of their lives, however, is something that has been given little academic attention and remains invisible.

## **The Study of Gender and Ageing**

As with the study of family life the study of ageing within sociology and gerontology was for many years dominated by a functionalist approach, one that evaluates an individual's status in terms of their being economically productive and functional for society as a whole. Implicit in a functionalist model of the social world is the view that "people are valued primarily in economic terms, and ... old age [is] a period of 'social redundancy' because most elderly people are not in paid employment" (Arber and Ginn, 1991:260). For women their 'function' includes producing and rearing the next generation of industrious individuals, therefore, once they are no longer of child-bearing age they too lose their value to society. Within this functionalist model, as people age and are no longer able to remain economically productive, it is seen as desirable, natural and inevitable that they will withdraw and disengage from society making way for younger 'more able' people to take their place. Old age is presented as a distinct and universal phase of life where it is assumed that the ageing individual loses the ability and the desire to remain connected to the productive world of work. Old people retire, separating themselves from the means of production which is seen as 'natural' as, being regarded as more self-absorbed and rigid in their views as they age, older people are perceived to be unable to take on new ideas or technologies (Cumming and Henry, 1961). What has become known as Disengagement Theory (Cumming and Henry, 1961) links with a bio-medical model of ageing that has again been criticised for putting forward a view of later life as essentially one of mental and physical decline and deterioration, pathologising old age as a disease (Estes, 1991). Although there are theories that challenge these views of ageing<sup>21</sup>, they remain powerful influences in society producing a

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<sup>21</sup> Butler introduced the notion of 'ageism' defining it as 'systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this for skin colour and gender' (Butler, 1975). Positive ways of ageing have been put forward see, Butler and Gleason (1985), with some post-modern theorists arguing for later life to be seen in terms of choices for reinventing the self (Gilleard and Higgs, 1996). Critical gerontologist Biggs (1999) argues for an understanding of the 'Mature Imagination' as being a complex interplay between psychoanalytic theories that favour depth of meaning (looking back to childhood and

negative view of later life.

The bio-medical approach sees ageing as causing problems both for the old person experiencing it, and, for society as a whole, and therefore must provide the means to solve them. The bio-medical model sees old age as a problem that can be alleviated, or kept at bay, through a variety of medical interventions. The focus is on the individual with the physician in control of the definitions and treatment of old age as a disease. At the level of society, older people are perceived as becoming dependent and therefore a burden to its younger members who, through their taxes and caring, have to provide for them. A combination of disengagement theory and a bio-medical model of ageing has resulted in the emphasis of research on the experience of ageing as an individual dilemma that needs policies and practices to assist older people to adapt to their changing roles and successfully integrate into society during later life. Essentially, researchers adopting this view of ageing see 'successful ageing' as being associated with a continuation of mid-life, remaining active, both socially and physically (Havighurst and Albrecht, 1953): it is the individual who needs to adjust in positive ways to old age by replacing an active, productive working life with an active, productive retirement (ibid., 1953). The narrative is one of remaining an active member of society for as long as possible. This can be in the form of work-like activities, leisure practices, learning new skills, voluntary work, and particularly for women, caring work and easing the burden for family members.

Recognising the absence of gender as a significant factor affecting the experience of ageing, feminists have begun to critically engage with the study and theories of ageing (Estes, 1991; Bernard and Meade, 1993; Browne, 1998; Bernard et al., 2000; Chambers, 2000; Calasanti and Slevin, 2001; Estes et al., 2003). As Calasanti and Slevin (2001) state,

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into the subconscious) and post-modern ideas that favour surface meaning, choice and fluidity in understanding the formation of identity as we age.

the model of successful ageing being drawn upon is that of middle age, and more particularly white, male, middle-class middle-age which is in itself both ageist and gender blind, and as Morris (1993) argues it takes no account of those who might be disabled, nor does it address differences of race and culture (hooks, 1984). It reflects a set of assumptions about appropriate behaviour in later life, as Estes et al argue, 'that are faithfully reproduced in research findings' (2003:13). Those who do not fit within the boundaries of such a middle-age male view of life may feel as though they are failing or marginal to society.

This has important repercussions for older women as grandmothers. The connection between dominant discourses of ageing and their adoption by older people as part of their identity need to be explored. Problems associated with ageing and the solutions that professionals suggest are socially constructed, interpreted and internalised. Those who produce theories of ageing help define old age by constructing the discourses surrounding ageing and the 'problems' that accrue to this time of life: 'the problems of the elderly are only those that experts, policymakers, and the public media define as true' (Estes, 1991: 28): And importantly, the relationship between the professionals defining the 'problems' of old age and the older persons being offered the 'solutions' creates a situation that frequently masks the power relations that such relationships produce.

The intersection of gender and ageing along with race and class, are key variables influencing the course of growing old, influencing an individual's location in and experience of social life and therefore of being a grandmother. However, the juncture of age relations and gender relations is an underdeveloped area in mainstream social theory (Arber and Ginn, 1995a). Although Gerontology has brought different theories to the study of ageing, some of which have contained elements that have addressed gender differences, it has offered only partial

explanations and predictions of the experience of ageing for women. Gerontology as a discipline has tended to take an overly 'scientific' approach to the study of ageing, leaving the larger political or existential meaning of this stage of life unaccounted for (Biggs, 1993; Ovrebo and Minkler, 1993). In many cases gender has not been treated as a significant variable within Gerontological research methodology and therefore the resulting findings do not give an accurate and meaningful picture of what the experience of ageing for an older woman might be.

Feminist theorising has brought gender to the forefront of any analysis of social life, recognising gender as a vital organising principle in the economic and power relations in societal organisations as well as all aspects of everyday life throughout the life course. Any study of age must begin by acknowledging gender as being a determinant of the multiple oppressions women suffer throughout their lives, and as Browne argues, any study of ageing must acknowledge 'the relationship between gender and power through the life cycle, and the role of social structures in shaping and maintaining such oppressions' (1998:xxxiv). Gender and ageing play an important role in the unequal distribution of resources between men and women (Arber and Ginn, 1995a) and in the ways in which individuals come to know themselves in the world (Estes, 1991). Social policies and social attitudes have, over time, greatly influenced the experience of older women. Depending on which cohort of women they belong to, with class and race being two other major influencing factors, their working lives will have been affected more or less by their involvement in child care and by which types of work are seen as appropriate and therefore available to them, with the result that their contributions to pension schemes may not be equal to those of male workers (Arber and Ginn, 1995b). These material factors, linked with the personal everyday experience and life history of individuals, are connected at every level of social life.

### **Adopting a Feminist Life Course Perspective**

Any study of how individuals experience life events, such as becoming a grandmother, must be located in the context of the cumulative effect of those individual, family and historical experiences that shaped their previous lives as well as recognising that families change over a life course (Rapoport et al., 1982; Morgan, 1996; Bernardes, 1997). Taking a life-course perspective, as David Morgan (1985) argues, is important when looking at family life as it is 'more individual in its emphasis, more appreciative of difference and variation and ...as concerned with linking historical time and individual biography as with tracing individual progressions through particular typified stages' (Morgan, 1985:178).

A feminist life course perspective places gender as a factor that intersects at every level of social life (Estes, 1991; Arber and Ginn, 1995a; Browne, 1998; Bernard et al., 2000; Estes et al., 2003). It provides a means of analysis that acknowledges the relevance of women's commitments, beliefs and attitudes associated with their particular cohort and individual life history in understanding how they manage and synchronize their lives. The diverse careers women experience throughout their life-course, influenced by social structure, cultural and demographic change, their life history, and the agency of the individual together decide their distinctive involvement within the diverse social worlds they inhabit. Women develop ways of coping with the demands on their scarce resources, time, energy and affection. As David Morgan argues 'women develop strategies in order to manage their finite resources and the relevant strains and stresses' (Morgan, 1985:179). It is these strategies and experiences that older women as grandmothers develop that need to be explored further.

Morgan argues that in order to gain a broader understanding of how and why women develop the strategies that they do as grandmothers, a more holistic picture of kinship relations is needed, one that looks for 'a

family dimension in all or most areas of social enquiry' (Morgan, 1996:186). Researching grandmothers' lives should not be seen as a separate and distinct area but as interlinked with most areas of sociological study. Family and kinship relations should not be treated as somehow removed from and unaffected by the rest of society but as part of society. The process of ageing and the construction of gender also need to be understood in this way. The economy and the world of work, education, social policy, leisure, health, technology and housing inter-linked with gender, race, class and age all influence the nature and experience of family life. Morgan uses the metaphor of the kaleidoscope to illustrate the fluid multifaceted ever-changing nature of family life:

With one turn we see a blending of distinctions between home and work, family and economy, and the idea of the household moves into sharper focus. With another turn, the apparently solid boundaries of the household dissolve and we see family and kinship, and possibly other, relationships spreading out across these fainter boundaries. With each twist of the kaleidoscope we see that these patterns are differently coloured according to gender, age and generation and other social divisions (Morgan, 1996:33).

Some psychologists have suggested the idea of grandparenthood as an 'ideal' role for older people giving them a purpose and status in later life (Kivnick, 1980; Kivnick, 1988; Kornhaber, 1996; Silverstein et al., 1998; Silverstein and Long, 1998). This research is an example of an approach that conceptualises grandparenthood in terms of a fixed stage in the life cycle, making no allowance for gender differences and the diverse experiences of older men and women in general (Aldous, 1995) and for those who might have a different perspective on later life (Estes, 1991; Greer, 1992; Friedan, 1993; Estes et al., 2003). Feminists (Browne, 1998; Calasanti and Slevin, 2001) and critical gerontologists such as Estes (1991), Biggs (1993) and Phillipson (1998) have argued that adopting a universal view of old age makes little or no allowance for factors such as class, ethnicity, gender, health, personal history, social history and local environment as well as changing attitudes towards the experience of ageing. All of these factors can have major effects on

what kind of old age is deemed possible (Estes, 1991). It also accepts without question the assumption that individuals will associate growing older with the loss of roles associated with earlier life as a problem. This does not take into account the probability that for many older women and men old age may be looked forward to as a release from the restrictions, pressures and commitments that their previous work and gender roles might have involved (Greer, 1992; Friedan, 1993). Adopting a feminist life course perspective allows the researcher to bring into the analysis the context of the individual's past and present experiences whilst also acknowledging their future thinking and planning. The existing literature supports the notion that time affects the nature and experience of the grandmother/grandchild relationship and that for the individuals concerned the relationship will have different meanings, and offer different levels of involvement at different points in their lifetime (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1985; Szinovacz, 1998). Hareven (1978) and others (Goldthorpe et al., 1980; Wallman, 1984; Blaxter, 1992) have discussed concepts of time that recognise that in any one social situation a variety of times may coexist. How these different levels of time influence experience and practice is very much an individual concern. The notion of the relevance of the timing of events within an individual's life-course as needing to take into account individual time, historical time and family time is therefore vital in understanding experience which in turn influences practice (Hareven, 1978; Hareven and Adams, 1982). The 'timing' of becoming a grandmother affects the experience (Burton, 1987; Burton and Dilworth-Anderson, 1991).

### **Social Structure, Demographics and Ageing**

Psychological studies have tended to ignore social context and the variety of social, structural and demographic factors that impact on ageing in general and grandparenting in particular. Townsend relocates the problems of dependency and ageing in the social structure, rather



than individual terms (Townsend, 1981). Townsend puts forward a perspective in which the emphasis is on the social creation of dependency. The term 'structured dependency' derives from the attempt to shift attention from the characteristics of the individual to those of the wider social system. Townsend draws attention to four main sources of 'structured dependency'; the effect of retirement policies, poverty, residential care and community care policies that together produce what Townsend calls 'grateful passive recipients' (1981:22). Townsend calls for a 'political economy' approach combining sociological, economic and political analysis of ageing (Townsend, 1981).

Estes and others bring gender into the equation recognising that gender and the experience of ageing is 'conditioned by one's location in the social structure and the relations generated by the economic mode of production and the gendered nature of the division of labour' (1991:21). The structure of women's working lives may decrease their earning potential throughout their lives and their subsequent level of pension rights leading to poverty in old age (Minkler and Stone, 1985; Arber and Ginn, 1995b). As women also live longer than men, ill health in old, old age disproportionately affects women. Race is another determinant of poverty and ill health in older women's lives. There is a cumulative disadvantage linking race, class, gender and age. Women of colour from a variety of ethnic backgrounds tend to have a history of lower earnings than white women and therefore a combination of poverty and poor housing increase their chances of poorer health (Blakemore and Boneham, 1993). Older people in minority ethnic groups are generally disadvantaged by social structure, and by the attitudes of social work and health care professional who tend to see them as 'passive victims' in need of care. Professionals are in powerful positions and, by uncritically accepting such negative views of certain groups, they can, by their actions, marginalize individuals within those groups and ignore

their contributions to communities.

### **Divorce and its effects on grandmothing**

Structural and demographic changes impact on the lives of grandmothers in a variety of ways whatever their ethnic group. A demographic factor that has important consequences for the grandmother/grandchild relationship is the increased divorce rate and consequently increased numbers of single parent families (Johnson, 1985; Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986; Smart and Neale, 2004). As mentioned earlier, divorce can have profound repercussions for grandparents and the level of contact they have with their grandchildren as the need for grandparents' help may increase (Creasey and Koblewski, 1991). They are often seen as the preferred secondary carers with grandmothers often acting as surrogate mothers (Martin and Roberts, 1984; Dench and Thomson, 1999). Dench and Thomson's study of grandparents found that in times of family crisis, grandparents were the key resource for children at all levels with grandmothers providing the most support. The kinds of support they offered were as practical everyday carers; emotional anchors; models of achievement; listeners; and as sources of information (1999). Mitchell's study of children's experiences following the separation of parents found that grandmothers were 'often the best known, best loved, and most available adults apart from the parents' (Mitchell, 1985:71).

Grandmothers often provide a link to bring together fragmented families, perhaps providing a place for children and estranged parents to meet, or providing a sense of continuity and belonging when families break down (Young, 1997).

The connections between increased family breakdown and resulting single parent families and the lack of adequate childcare facilities in Britain have increased pressures particularly on maternal grandmothers to provide this care. It is clear then that factors such as increased

financial hardship and emotional trauma brought on by the divorce of their children can severely affect the role grandparents feel obliged to take (Creasey and Koblewski, 1991; Drew and Smith, 1999). Dench stated that:

The fact that the highest rates of grand parental childcare are done where parents are separated provides the main evidence for this. In these cases, the needs of the child and of the child's mother are so great that the grandparents feel they have to do it. There is a feeling among many of the grandparents who are doing a lot of child care that they are carrying the consequences of the lifestyle choices of their children. Many grandparents feel that the mothers have a duty to do a large part of the child care and that they should be arranging their lives in a way that gets support of husbands and partners and not dumping it all on the grandparents.....Whereas 20 years ago, about 15 per cent of grandparents were involved in looking after children, with the current young grandparents it is more like a third' (Dench, 1999 quoted in Eden, 2000).

Grandparents, or more specifically grandmothers, are carrying the consequences of many years of social policies that have failed to meet the need for pre-school and after school child care places, again on the assumption that women will continue to adjust their lives in order to carry out this work. Although Dench is using the term grandparents he recognises that there are gender differences in the grandparents' roles with maternal grandmothers taking the most active role (Dench, 1999 cited in Eden, 2000). But as with many other studies, the ways in which gender affects the experience and practice of being a grandmother is largely ignored.

Contrary to increasing grandparental responsibility, divorce may have the effect of denying grandparents access to their grandchildren, often causing concern and heartache for those grandparents involved (Johnson, 1985; Dench and Thomson, 1999). A further consequence of divorce is the resulting increased numbers of reconstituted families. For

families this means that not only is there an increase in the numbers of step-parents but also step-grandparents and therefore possible areas of conflict. In response to many of the problems they face grandparents are beginning to become politically organised. Several organisations have been set up both in America and Britain to deal specifically with what appear to be significant problems faced by grandparents today. In Britain the *Grandparents' Federation* is lobbying for the rights of grandparents to have access to their grandchildren following divorce and gives support and information to grandparents. Several organisations both in the U.S. and in Britain have been established to give grandparents advice and support in a variety of circumstances<sup>22</sup>.

There is a growing body of evidence, both in America and Britain, showing that grandparents are increasingly taking on the role of parents to their grandchildren (Jendrek, 1994; Fuller-Thomson et al., 1997; Bryson and Casper, 1998; Bengston, 2001). More than one in ten grandparents have cared for a grandchild for six months or longer; half of these continued care for at least three years (Fuller-Thomson et al., 1997). More than three-quarters of grandparents raising grandchildren are women; 43% are grandmothers without a spouse (Fuller-Thomson et al., 1997).

Ethnicity also affects the experience of grandmothering as proportionately more grandmother headed households are to be found in black households than white households (Fuller-Thomson et al.,

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<sup>22</sup> *Grandparent Resource Centre, Grandparents' Federation, Grandparents' Forum Advice, Grandparents' and Parents' Support, Grandparents' Parenting Again, Grandparent Support Organisation, GrandsPlace* are further examples of organisations supporting grandparents. BBC Local Radio also ran a series of programmes throughout November and December 2000 entitled the '*Grandparent Business*' featuring stories from grandchildren and grandparents. The series recognised the importance of grandparents as a source of emotional help for children following divorce and also the possibility of the breakdown of grandparent/grandchild relationships following divorce. The Guardian launched a monthly Grandparents' section in December 2000 and carried out a poll revealing the crucial role of grandparents in childcare (Prasad, 2000:7).

1997). Black grandmothers are also more likely to suffer the effects of social deprivation and to be living without a spouse (Bryson and Casper, 1998). Social problems associated with drug culture and AIDS also mean that being black and female increases the likelihood of poverty with many black grandmothers taking up the position of surrogate mothers for their grandchildren (Minkler et al., 1993; Fuller-Thomson et al., 1997).

For many grandmothers finding themselves in the position of having to take on the responsibility of caring for their grandchild can have adverse affects on their mental health (Jendrek, 1994; Curtis, 1998). Four recent studies in the U.S.A. have reported depression and stress related illnesses in cases where grandmothers are raising their grandchildren (Jendrek, 1994; Fuller-Thomson et al., 1997; Rodgers-Farmer, 1999; Caputo, 2001). For many grandmothers finding themselves in this position financial hardship may also be a significant factor (Chalfie, 1994; Fuller-Thomson et al., 1997; Bryson and Casper, 1998). Children in grandmother-headed families are also reported to be twice as likely to be receiving public assistance (Harden et al., 1997). Finding themselves in the position of having to provide for another generation can be a major financial burden. This is a situation that most grandparents will not have made allowances for when planning for their old age. They are often unsure of where to go for help, what their legal rights are, or their entitlement to benefits when caring for grandchildren. Many worry about what might happen to the grandchild if they should be taken ill or die. For some the stress of dealing with difficult circumstances such as drug addiction or a prison sentence for the child's parents can be very stigmatising (Minkler et al., 1993; Rodgers-Farmer, 1999; Zerai, 2000). When grandmothers are co-residing with their teenage daughters and their grandchildren, grandmothers are often the major source of emotional and practical support, with the result that their own mental health may deteriorate. Group work with the mothers of teenage mothers have been set up to help the grandmothers

deal with a number of difficult issues (Dennison and Ingledew, 1999).

### **Locating grandmothering within a life course**

It would appear that gender, class, social structure, demographics and race all affect the experience of being a grandmother. A further influencing factor is the chronological age of the individual grandmother and the particular cohort she belongs to. A feminist life course perspective allows a more flexible and holistic approach to the experience of ageing, and specifically in this instance being a grandmother, that is, 'a total-life-span, total-life-space approach to human development' (Sugarman, 1986). The timing of an event within a life course also has an effect on the experience and practice. For example, grandmothers cover a wide range of ages from under thirty years of age to over eighty. They originate from different cohorts and are therefore likely to have a wide variety of values and priorities. Some women can become grandmothers in their late twenties (Bunyan, 1998) and the average age is early fifties, however, most studies concentrate on older grandparents which leaves most of the population of grandmothers unaccounted for. The nature of the involvement with grandchildren is likely to be affected by the chronological age of the grandmother and the grandchild (Hagestad, 1985; Troll, 1995). In a study of 58 grandmothers, older grandmothers were found to have significantly less contact with their grandchildren than younger grandmothers (Johnson, 1983; Johnson, 1985). Johnson (1983) attributes this finding to an age factor with older grandmothers being significantly less family oriented than younger ones. Increased old age combined with failing health also influence the type and amount of contact grandparents have with their grandchildren (Johnson, 1983; Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1985). Younger grandmothers are likely to be more involved than older grandmothers (Troll, 1983) in a more active fun-loving capacity seeing themselves as 'too young' to fit the traditional image of the passive, nurturing, grandmother (Johnson, 1983).

The age at which a woman becomes a grandmother and the levels of satisfaction gained from the relationship appear to provide some contradictory evidence. Women may experience becoming a grandmother in negative terms at a time in their lives when they have too many commitments, when they feel they are too young (Burton, 1987; Szinovacz, 1998) or when they are too old and infirm (Johnson, 1983). There appears to be a preferred, or ideal time to become a grandmother with 'premature' grandmothers feeling that they were experiencing this event 'off time' (Burton, 1987), and others stating that they were too old, feeling lacking in energy unable to take on some of the more dynamic aspects of grandmothering (Burton and Dilworth-Anderson, 1991). However, there is evidence that today's grandmothers are more likely to want to remain actively involved with their families for longer than perhaps their own parents' generation (Bengston, 2001).

Not only is the chronological age of the grandmother significant, but *when* she was born also matters. As Walby explains, women of different birth cohorts have faced contrasting 'gendered opportunity structures', with different sets of options and resources, and consequently will develop 'different values and moralities, different political agendas and priorities' (Walby, 1997:11). The dominant discourses that prevail in society at any given point in time are influential in how gender identities are constructed and taken up. Identities are created within the context of dominant discourses of how women experience and are expected to live their lives. This further affects their aspirations and how they wish to live their lives in the future. Discourses are not distinct from practices and are important in helping to understand the ways in which we act in the world. Taking Foucault's work as the basis for her argument, Lawler (2000) conceptualises this power-knowledge symbiosis in this way:

Power can be seen as something which works productively – producing truths, forms of pleasure, categories of normality. Rather than *concealing* the 'true' situation, the operation of power *produces* (what is held to be) the truth of a situation. Conversely, knowledge, far

from being the innocent and transparent representation of objective truth, is intrinsically bound up with the workings of power. The truth-status of 'truths' derives, not from some transcendent quality of the knowledges themselves, but from specific social and political preoccupations. Rather than *representing* truth, knowledges create and constitute the Truths by which contemporary Euroamericans have increasingly come to know and to act upon the self, both in relation to itself, and in relation to others. Categories of human subject – the categories 'mother' and 'daughter' for example – are not only understood through the meanings put on to them; rather they are *produced* within discourse (Lawler, 2000:22).

Recognising the ways in which knowledge from the disciplines of Psychiatry and Psychology have become accepted as the 'truth' and embedded not only in professionals' lives, but also in the minutiae of routine everyday life, in magazines, TV Programmes, soaps and children's literature, is important in understanding the representations and scripts individuals draw from in order to construct their own subjectivity. Psychological theories permeate the literature on self-help, childcare advice, personal growth, and the relentless search for the 'truth' about the self. Individual women have to negotiate and make sense of the gendered discourses through which the categories 'mother' and 'grandmother' are constituted and, as Lawler states, 'they are the means by which mothers, in particular, are scrutinised, monitored and regulated, and through which both mothers and daughters may scrutinise and regulate themselves' (2000:23).

### **The discourse of caring: A triple measure**

Probably the most dominant discourse applied to women worldwide is that which places women in the role of carers both in the private and the public sphere. A mother is seen as the 'natural' embodiment of this discourse (Phoenix et al., 1991). Grandmothers are perceived as possessing *double measure* of this caring nature as, still being mothers, they now have a second generation to care for. As women in their



middle years they may also still be required to care for their own parents generation (Phillips 2000) thus providing them with a *triple measure* of responsibility. The responsibility for society's 'caring' (Finch and Groves, 1983; Noddings, 1984) and 'emotional work' (Hochschild, 1989; James, 1989; Duncombe and Marsden, 1993), particularly family life and childhood development, are placed firmly on the shoulders of women. This notion is indiscriminately applied to all women whether or not they have family members dependent on them, 'It is the collective position of women which is decisive' (Freeman, 1982:136). This discourse of 'caring as a labour of love' is given extra weight in the case of older women as, once their children have grown, they are perceived as having little else to fill their time other than living their life through meeting the needs of others (Neugarten, 1979).

These varying levels of perceived responsibilities and abilities to care continually reinforce the idea of older women as the providers of care, both in the family and in the wider society as the mainstays of care within Community and Voluntary Organisations (Abel and Nelson, 1990; Bagipole, 1996). For middle-aged or older women as grandmothers this has important consequences for how they experience their lives. The social pressures created by such commonly understood discourses of caring and the guilt associated with denying this 'natural' and 'worthy' prescribed role for women are enormous.

Within the discourse of motherhood, becoming a mother is seen as the major route to adult female identity providing physical and emotional fulfillment. Motherhood is regarded as 'essential' or at least 'desirable' for all women (Ussher, 1990). Women therefore have to negotiate these 'constructed' notions of what it is to be female within their everyday lives. Traversing these prescriptive ideas of female identity arguably has a major impact on how older women as grandmothers experience their lives and on how they understand and come to terms with their *being* as an individual which in turn influences what they do in everyday

practice.

Feminists have long questioned such essentialist notions of women's 'natural' ability to care for others. Feminist theories that emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s considered feminism as a force for women's equality as being diametrically opposed to motherhood as an institution and practice (Friedan, 1965; Firestone, 1971). Women's adoption of the idea of caring as sacrificing the needs of the self for the needs of others, particularly those of children, was identified as a 'false-consciousness' perpetuating women's subordination to the needs of patriarchy (Firestone, 1971; Millett, 1977; Daly, 1978); and appropriating their labour in the interest of capitalism (Hartmann, 1981); while others argue that both patriarchy and capitalism conspire against women to keep them in the home for the benefits of both systems (Eisenstein, 1979; Walby, 1990). As Reinharz (1986) observes, early feminist consciousness was based on a rejection of the world of their mothers:

.....to some young feminists, the world of their mothers seems unattractive, 'politically incorrect'. A product of false consciousness. These women have yet to learn about sisterhood across the life cycle (Reinharz, 1986:507).

Feminists have theorised 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1989), that is caring work seen as a 'labour of love' and the 'compulsory' nature of caring for women (Land and Rose, 1985), as a dominant discourse that is applied to women generally and serves to disadvantage them. Difference feminism, however, puts forward the notion of women possessing an 'ethic of care' and theorises 'love' and 'emotion work', particularly in relation to children, as something to be valued as more desirable for all than male ethics which are associated with competitiveness and individuality (Rich, 1977; Gilligan, 1982; Ruddick, 1990). The major questions to unravel here are whether women are indeed giving this labour freely, that it is as 'a labour of love' worthy of being considered as separate and unique in relation to other kinds of

work, or are they in effect having this labour extracted from them through the emotionalisation of caring and housework and the fear of the social penalties leveled at women who do not 'care'? Is 'caring' therefore compulsory for women if they want to be accepted and is it therefore a form of oppression? Or is caring a reciprocal relation, given gladly, and experienced as empowering? These are some of the questions my research aims to answer.

Results from the limited research available indicate that grandmothers do care for and about their grandchildren and that gender influences the extent and nature of the relationship (Hagestad, 1985). Thomas (1986a) looked at gender differences in satisfaction with the grandparenting role. Overall, he found that grandmothers were significantly more satisfied with the experience than grandfathers. Grandmothers reported higher levels of responsibilities for helping with grandchildren and expressed the highest levels of satisfaction when caring for them (Thomas, 1986 a). It is recognised that a grandchild's relationship with a grandmother is the closest (Kahana and Kahana, 1971; Eisenberg, 1988; Somary and Stricker, 1998; Uhlenberg and Hammill, 1998).

Many studies, then, report that the role of grandmother is important in many older women's lives (Cunningham-Burley, 1985; Thompson et al., 1990; Bamford, 1994) and grandmothers are a source of knowledge about family history, therefore providing a sense of belonging, security and continuity in families (Hagestad, 1985). Women generally are seen as the providers of 'emotion work'; they are society's child-rearers, caregivers, and kin-keepers providing the glue that holds the family together and, it would appear, this caring role continues into grandmotherhood. However, it is difficult to know whether research findings are based on unquestioned assumptions about the nature of women's lives. Although much of the literature would seem to support the notion that women enjoy the grandmothering experience and spend

time with their grandchildren (Fischer, 1983; Thompson et al., 1990; Somary and Stricker, 1998; Dench et al., 1999), it is dangerous to assume that simply because people are related genealogically that family support will flow from one generation to the other. Finch and Mason's (1993) research into family obligations shows that a sense of responsibility for helping someone develops over time through continued interaction. Importance is also placed on reciprocity in relationships. This also develops over time and through sustained exchanges between individual family members. Just knowing that people are related does not guarantee that they will choose to help each other. It therefore appears to make little sense, as Finch and Mason argue: 'to build public policies which assume that certain types of assistance will be given automatically' (Finch and Mason, 1993). A study of young unmarried mothers found that many had limited contact with their families and received little in the way of support and assistance (Speak et al., 1995). Although generally it appears that grandmothering remains an important part of older women's lives, some contradictions do emerge in respect of the ways grandmothers behave.

## **Summary**

To sum up, family life may be changing but this does not mean that there is a loss of commitment to care for kin (Williams, 2004). The experience and practice of being a grandmother appears to be diverse (Bornat et al., 1999): their familial relationships may be very tenuous, or they may be extremely close, but whatever the experience, it will have some particular *meaning* to each individual woman. By becoming a grandmother they will have been elevated to being part of 'the older generation'. However, this transition in their life course may of course not feel like a step up, but rather a devaluation of their status and role in life. On the other hand it may be experienced as a release from the demands of caring for their families and seized as a challenge. The age at which a woman might become a grandmother varies considerably, thus placing them within different cohorts with different biographies and

diverse experiences. However, although many grandmothers are not old, with most women becoming grandmothers before they are fifty, the general perception is that they are old. In what is undoubtedly an ageist society, women cannot escape the constant barrage of negative images of ageing, grandmothers being one of them. What appears to be lacking in the literature is any account of how individual women negotiate their way through a process of either resisting, denying or identifying with popular cultural representations of ageing generally and grandmothers in particular. A life course approach is therefore important in understanding what it means to be a grandmother as the pathway each woman takes will vary according to her specific life history, her health, race, class, education with material, structural, social and cultural differences all playing their part. In aiming to understand what it means to be an older woman account must be taken of their position here and now, but also what has gone before. As Biggs argues, when aiming to understand the dynamics of identity and ageing, there needs to be 'a coming together of depth and surface, of continuity and cohesion' and a reflection on the past, a 'reconnection with longitudinal components of identity, the past and future possibility' and reflexivity which 'allows a critical apprehension of the present' (1999:8).

### **Research Questions**

It would appear that although the grandmother/grandchild relationship has the potential to be important for both parties, as well as for the intermediate generation there is little up to date evidence to explain the different experiences of *being* a grandmother and the meaning attached to it. There is little to say how far such experiences vary systematically according to factors such as gender, age, health, ethnicity<sup>23</sup> or social

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<sup>23</sup> As this study was carried out in the rural area of North Yorkshire that is made up of a predominantly white British population, it was not possible to obtain any respondents from different ethnic backgrounds. In order to correct this lack of diversity a sample from an ethnically diverse urban area would need to be included. Lack of time and

class and only partial evidence explaining how that meaning is affected by socio-cultural and demographic change. It is the aim of this research to examine through the telling of individual women's stories how these factors intersect with, and affect, their everyday lives and familial relations and provide answers to some of the questions that are lacking in the literature reviewed. The overriding question is to provide a more complete understanding of what it *means* to be a grandmother at the beginning of the twenty first century. My main research questions are, what is the role of a grandmother and what expectations are contained within the title 'grandmother'? How do older women identify with the role of grandmother? Is being a grandmother a role that older women choose to take up giving them purpose and status in later life or is it simply a symbolic title? My subsidiary questions are: How does being a grandmother fit with the rest of a woman's life? How do social structure, cultural expectations and demographic factors impact on the experience? How does the relationship between a grandmother and her grandchild differ from that with her own children? What effect does the relationship with the middle generation have on the grandmother/grandchild relationship? Is being involved as a grandmother something to do with reciprocity or ideas of family continuity? How does time, both in the sense of time passing and as a family resource, affect the experience and practice of grandmothing?

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prohibitive costs precluded this in my study.

# Chapter 3

## Researching Everyday Lives of Grandmothers: Methodology, Epistemology and Method

In this chapter I detail my theoretical and practical approach to the decision-making processes involved in the research design; how the fieldwork was carried out; and how the data was analysed. I explain my choice of a feminist qualitative approach, and in particular, why I elected to structure my research through a feminist life course perspective. I discuss the ethical dilemmas which I encountered, most notably my location positioning me as an 'insider' researcher as a grandmother and how I overcame problems of unequal power relations within the interview encounter. In the second section of this chapter I outline the research method; the structure and time frame of the fieldwork; how the sample were contacted; and how the data was collected. In conclusion I outline how I completed my analysis and I examine my own reflexive role throughout the research process.

### Methodology and epistemology

When undertaking a research project the particular methodology adopted provides a set of guidelines for seeing, interpreting and defining the parameters of the research in seeking what counts as knowledge. A range of methodologies exist because diverse schools of thought have different standards for judging between competing knowledge claims, as Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002) explain:

Each methodology links a specific *ontology* (for example, a belief that gender is social rather than natural) and a particular *epistemology* (a set of procedures for establishing what counts as knowledge) in providing *rules* that specify how to produce *valid knowledge of social*

*reality* (for example, the real nature of particular gender relations) (2002:11).

As feminists have argued, gender must be central to any analysis that aims to understand the social world and the construction of the self within it. I conducted this research within a feminist methodological framework recognising that gender is at the heart of what it means to be an older woman and a grandmother. Understandings and experiences of grandmothering are structured through gender and the process of ageing, therefore, any study of how individuals experience life events, such as becoming a grandmother, must be located in the context of the cumulative effect of their individual, family and historical experiences that shaped their previous lives (Arber and Evandrou, 1997; Bernard et al., 2000). Bringing a feminist life course approach to the research has allowed the ways in which gender and ageing are embedded at every level of social life, modifying an individual's experience throughout the life course, to emerge. My use of a feminist life course perspective will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

There is, however, no singular feminist methodology. Different feminists have 'different ontological beliefs (and so different theories) about the nature of reality and the objects of research' (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002:12). Feminism does not adopt a unified position but has been developed over time, providing multiple theories and politics for making sense of gendered lives having a diversity of beliefs, practices and politics and, feminists are divided about 'where ideas come from, how people make sense of experience, and what evidence is evidence of' (2002:10). There is a general consensus about the underlying role of feminist research and theorising and in particular, its questioning of what constitutes 'truth' and the means by which we, as feminist researchers, seek to uncover the lived experience of women. Feminist research questions existing 'truths' and explores relations between



knowledge and power (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002): Feminist research practice is identifiable through 'the questions we have asked, the way we locate ourselves within our questions, and the purpose of our work' (Kelly, 1988:6): 'Feminist research is politically *for* women; feminist knowledge has some grounding in women's *experiences*, and how it *feels* to live in unjust gendered relationships' (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002:16).

My research takes a feminist perspective starting from the standpoint of women, that is, recognising the importance of 'the everyday' experience of women in furthering our understanding of how they negotiate and make sense of their lives (Smith, 1988).

The point is to suggest a way of knowing from the meanings that women give to their labours. The search for dailiness is a method of work that allows us to take the patterns women create and the meanings women invent and learn from them. If we map what we learn connecting one meaning or invention to another we begin to lay out a different way of seeing reality. This way of seeing is what I refer to as the women's standpoint (Aptheker, 1989:50).

My research is grounded in feminist theory that argues for an epistemology that recognises the everyday experience of women; exploring how the everyday, routine experiences and practices of women produce legitimate knowledge claims (Smith, 1988). Thus the focus of this study is the ordinary routine experience and practice of grandmothers. I structure my research through a theoretical framework that acknowledges what Smith (1988) has termed, 'The Everyday World as Problematic'. The epistemological position taken is one that follows Smith's view that it is by 'beginning in women's experiences, told in women's words. [...] [T]aking women's standpoint and beginning in experience gives access to a knowledge of what is tacit, known in the doing, and often not yet discursively appropriated (and often seen as

uninteresting, unimportant, and routine)' (Smith, 1997:394-5). This epistemological position inclined me towards utilising a qualitative research method and, as I explain in more detail later, was the reason why I chose to use loosely structured, in depth interviews as my main research method. It was my aim to explore whether taking the stories of women's everyday lives and making them visible, might reveal the interconnectedness of the ways in which gender, socio-cultural factors, demographics, age, class and health impact on their experience.

My theoretical position is one that recognises that it is the multi-layered level of experience that regulates and informs our sense of self and ultimately what we do in practice. As Smith states, making visible everyday experience 'preserves the presence of the actual subjects while exploring the relations in which our everyday worlds are embedded' (Smith, 1988:111).

Whilst I recognise that there is no definitive way of doing feminist research, in preparing for my interviews my concerns were directed towards the task of how to approach my research as a feminist. What did I understand to be the moral, ethical and political principles I should adhere to whilst carrying out my research? Feminist research is not only concerned with the how, but also with where we position 'the self', recognising the need to acknowledge our theory and politics within a research process (Maynard and Purvis, 1994). For the feminist researcher then, acknowledging her theoretical and political position within the research is critical. Stanley and Wise argue that for research to be recognised as feminist it is necessary to acknowledge that:

Feminism is not merely a 'perspective', a way of seeing; nor even this plus epistemology, a way of knowing; it is also an ontology, or a way of being in the world' (Stanley and Wise, 1990:14).

This statement has a great deal of significance for me. The idea that a

feminist research process is both a way of *being* as well as a way of *doing* connects with my understanding of how feminist research should be carried out. All three factors are important in influencing the topic of my research and my approach, therefore it is important to state that starting from my own experience, as Smith argues, is 'starting from the standpoint of women' and therefore:

The work of inquiry in which I am engaged proceeds by taking this experience of mine, this experience of other women...and asking how it is organized, how it is determined, what the social relations are which generate it (Smith, 1979:135).

I follow Smith's approach by beginning from our own centre, beginning from our own experience, in order to 'make ourselves as women the subjects of the sociological act of knowing' (Smith, 1979:154). It was my personal experience that had brought me to this research and provided me with many questions that I felt needed to be answered.

### **The advantages and disadvantages of 'insider' knowledge:**

The location of myself as researcher in this project is something that I have established from the outset. I am a middle aged, middle-class woman, a wife, mother, daughter and a grandmother, a feminist and a mature post-graduate student in Women's Studies. In this particular context of studying what it means to be a grandmother, being an older woman, a mother and a grandmother myself, places me in the position of having some 'insider' knowledge that I hoped I could share with the women I aimed to interview. Some feminists take the view that shared personal experience is an asset, some would say a necessity, enabling a level of closeness to develop with research participants in order to make legitimate knowledge claims (Oakley, 1981; Mies, 1983; Morris, 1989). Such an understanding means that 'good' qualitative research will *only* result from developing a 'genuine' rapport with research participants. For such a degree of intimacy and trust to develop requires

a level of disclosure by the interviewer. However, as Shulamit Reinharz (1992) argues, such a situation can become an unwelcome responsibility for both the interviewer and interviewee:

'Achieving rapport' should not become a burdensome, and sometimes inappropriate, form of 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1983) feminist researchers must do if they engage in research with people. Rather, feminists who do research with people should consider rapport to be a fortunate outcome of some projects rather than a precondition of all research relationships. In general, rapport between two people develops only with time and a sense of shared interests. To try to 'achieve' rapport without these prerequisites is an arduous endeavor prone to failure (Reinharz, 1992:267).

I recognise that the interviewer needs to be critically aware of the powerful position they hold in setting and controlling the questions. By setting the agenda and interpreting of the data she places the interviewee in a relatively less powerful position (Mason, 2002). The privileged position of the researcher means that she can exercise power by turning people's lives into authoritative texts; by hearing some things and ignoring or excluding others; by ruling some issues as unrelated to 'proper' knowledge (Smith, 1998). However, it does not follow that the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee has to be exploitative. I take up Reinharz's view that 'nonexploitative relations 'can be developed without the unrealistic aim of attempting to achieve 'rapport' or 'intimacy' with *all* research participants. 'Relations of respect, shared information, openness, and clarity of communication seem like reasonable substitute goals' (1992:267).

Feminists have been discussing the power relationship in women interviewing women since the early 1980s. The ideal most pursued is a 'non-hierarchical' relationship based on a shared experience of gender subordination (Oakley, 1981);

...in most cases, the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of interviewee and interviewer is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship (Oakley, 1981:41).

However, it is recognised that 'it is not always easy to reduce the power dynamics that are likely to be present in research and it is unlikely that they can ever be eradicated completely' (Maynard and Purvis, 1994:16). Ribbens argues that '[u]ltimately, research interviews may inescapably involve power imbalances, stemming from public domains' (1989: 580). Power dynamics within an interview can result from social attributes such as the interviewer's social class, education and professional status as they 'imply different cultural backgrounds as well as a different power relationship within the interview itself ' (Ribbens, 1989:581). As Ning Tang states, 'differences in women interviewing women are not a matter of the quality of the interview in simple terms, but of the dynamics between the interview pair' the power dynamics being based on the 'differences in social, cultural and personal backgrounds' (2002:704). In contrast, it has been argued that the power dynamics in the interview are not necessarily fixed but fluid with, in some cases, the interviewer feeling disempowered either through age, class, race or not having experience of the subject they are researching (Bola, 1996). I was aware in coming to this research of the possible power dynamics in the interview situation and that my hoped for 'insider' status as a grandmother is only a part of who I am. I could also be perceived as an 'outsider' in that I am from a middle-class background, an academic, and more particularly a feminist academic from a 'Women's Studies' Department', a label that may bring with it certain assumptions. I recognised that the women I was going to interview may not identify with feminist principles and therefore this might cause problems of my being accepted by my participants. However, my concerns were unfounded as none of the women asked about or

appeared to be concerned about my possible 'feminist' politics, what they were more interested in was my recently acquired status as a grandmother. However, I did need to be aware that my location as a feminist might involve me placing interpretations on their experiences that they would not necessarily accept as 'true' for them.

As researcher I was aware of my power over the research process in deciding the questions to be asked, but also in the analysis of the data. Interpretations and analysis of research material and the making of knowledge claims is a contentious issue. Borland reflected on the problems she encountered when interpreting an interview she conducted with her grandmother. She had presented her grandmother as a 'pro-feminist heroine' but later found that her grandmother expressed strong disagreement with her conclusions (Borland, 1991):

So your interpretation of the story as a female struggle for autonomy within a hostile male environment is entirely YOUR interpretation. You've read into the story what you wished to – what pleases YOU. That it was never – by any wildest stretch of the imagination – the concern of the originator of the story makes such an interpretation a definite and complete distortion, and in this respect I question its authenticity. The story is no longer MY story at all. The skeleton remains, but it has become your story. (Hanson, quoted in Borland, 1991:70, capitals in original).

One way of dealing with such a problem is to adopt an approach that aims to empower the researched (Maynard and Purvis, 1994); however, it is doubtful whether this is possible. One of the reasons for setting out to do this research was to give a voice to a group of women who are rarely heard. The problem with 'representing the other' in this way, is to remain 'authentic' in the way in which their voices are interpreted and thus represented, 'that is, many feminists want *both* to enable the voices of Others to be heard, *and* to create social and political change

for or on behalf of those Others' (Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996:22, italics in original). There is always a conflict, or at least a dilemma, between simply 're-presenting' our subjects (describing them, painting a portrait of them, speaking 'about' them) and 'representing' them (acting as their proxies or advocates, speaking 'for' them) ' (Spivak, 1986 quoted in Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 1996:23).

The problem of interpretation and of remaining 'true' to the words of the women and their intended meaning is a problem that I have grappled with throughout the analysis. I have continually questioned knowledge claims based on *my* interpretations, which at times made it feel impossible to make any claims at all. I questioned whether I had been rigorous enough in my research process; whether I had made any assumptions or had shown any biases in coding or interpreting my data. The ethics of doing feminist research is therefore something that needs to be considered at every stage of the research process. Generally speaking in the social sciences statements are made at the level of principles that should, or ought, to govern research conduct (Faden and Beauchamp, 1986). They specify a set of regulations that systemise the process. As Stanley and Wise (1993) argue, such an approach is not really helpful as it separates off research as a particular and distinct kind of behaviour specifying a given set of ethical principles that are different from other kinds of social behaviour. For me this argument holds true. Research as an activity cannot be separated out and treated differently from the rest of life. Within an interview situation I am a woman, a feminist and a researcher all rolled into one. I neither could, nor would I want to, separate the woman or the feminist from the researcher.

## Reflexivity in the Research Process

I have critically placed myself within my research with the intention of being open and honest about my thought processes and my own academic background. By locating myself in the research process from the beginning my motives were clear to the interviewees. This openness, I believe, put participants at ease within the interview process allowing rich and meaningful data to emerge. As researchers it is important to recognise we bestow meaning as well as discover meaning (Jaffe and Miller, 1994). What then must become a 'self-reflexive' research practice, involves trying to situate oneself and one's work in an open discursive framework, being open to adjustment as we read and debate our work with others. Having a good understanding of your research topic, becoming close to those you are interviewing, being self-aware, that is knowing oneself as a researcher, are important factors in gaining ethically sound and quality research material. Traditionally, being close to and/or empathetic within the research project has been seen as obscuring an objective gaze, but having a passion for the subject undoubtedly brings benefits. 'Our doubts and uncertainties are not only natural they are even desirable. They keep us honest, for one thing – by obliging us continually to *question* our purposes, our motives, our values, our integrity, our scholarship (our ethics). And they make for better science' (Bowles and Klein, 1983:113, italics in the original).

A common factor within feminist research, is that the researcher discloses something of herself, making visible her own intellectual autobiography. As Stanley and Wise (1993) point out the researcher is also a subject in her research and her personal history is part of the process through which understanding and conclusions are reached. The production of knowledge of the social world is not simply something that is 'excavated', in the sense of the interviewee being the site of



knowledge, 'the job of the interviewer [being] to unearth the relevant information' (Mason, 2002:226), rather, knowledge of the social world is a process, a social construction, which is fluid, negotiated and contextual. The interview therefore, needs to be treated as 'a site of knowledge construction, and the interviewee and interviewer as co-participants in the process' (ibid, 2002: 227). Jaffe and Miller (1994) usefully discuss the way that meaning is constituted through the research process.

The meanings we claim as our own are like cognitive and moral lenses: they present a framework that provides understandings for objects, acts, gestures, and words. Meaning creation is social. It emerges in and through social interaction (Blumer, 1969). It is accomplished by actors who create themselves and their social worlds as they create meaning. At the same time, actors are selves, having the unique ability to stand outside their world and perceive themselves and others in relation to it (Jaffe and Miller, 1994:53).

The research process thus consists of interacting systems of meaning. Research results and knowledge are the products of this interaction. However, the researcher needs to be constantly aware of the possible power dynamics within the interviewer/interviewee relationship and her powerful position in controlling the research process thus, providing her with the means to impose her view of the world:

If knowledge is socially constructed, then the interaction that produces that knowledge is very much at issue. If the qualitative researchers and those they study collaborate in the creation of meaning (Frank 1980) and the researcher stands in a superordinate position in the process, then the outcome of the collaboration may reflect, be consistent with, and support the meanings and world view of the researcher (Jaffe and Miller, 1994:56).

## Method

In designing the research project I attempted to remain mindful of feminist debate and used the guiding principles (discussed above) throughout my management of the research project. The research design and process were completed over a period of nineteen months. Table 1 below sets out the time frame of how the research was designed and conducted.

**Table 1 Research Design and Research Process**

<b>Research Design</b>	
Refine research questions	October - December 2000
Decide on research method	October – December 2000
Plan interview process	December - February 2001
Refine interview questions	January 2001
Decide how to access interviewees	January 2001
Design posters and questionnaire	February 2001
<b>Research Process</b>	
Find participants through advertising and snowballing	February - April 2001
Set interview schedule	March – April 2001
Conduct Pilot Study	May 2001
Interviews take place	May – August 2001
Transcribe interviews	May – October 2001
Code and analyse data	May 2001 – April 2002
Reflect on research as ongoing process	May 2001 – April 2002

### *Research Questions*

As discussed at the end of Chapter Two, the main research question which guided this study was whether at the end of the 20th Century in Britain when much media rhetoric would seem to herald the end of "family values" and social obligations, the concept of the role of "grandmother" has any significant *meaning* to women in this position within the genealogy of their families. Contained within the parameters of this question are a series of secondary questions: How do grandmothers and their grandchildren negotiate/decide what their roles are within the family? What are the potential tensions for grandmothers between traditionally held views of women's 'natural' propensity to carry out society's caring/nurturing roles and women's emancipation and increased independence? How do grandmothers perceive themselves within wider society? What is the nature and level of satisfaction derived from their relationship with their grandchildren? How does this relationship change and or develop over the life course? How have changes in lifestyle together with other social, cultural, political, economic and demographic changes weakened or strengthened family ties and therefore a grandmother's sense of obligation or responsibility to provide support for her grandchildren? How are the generation of women in the middle, who may be both grandmothers and daughters, affected by reduced state involvement in providing social welfare services for the elderly and a return to 'the family' as providers of 'care in the community'? How do grandmothers organise and prioritise their time? In particular, what demands are made on their time? How does the experience of being a grandmother change over time? How do the age of the grandmother and the age of the grandchild affect the relationship? These questions structure my research.

The research aims to uncover what grandmothers themselves understand to be their role, and whether their understanding fits with what is expected of them by their families, wider society and other aspects of their daily lives. The aim of the research questions is to

uncover the diverse personal experiences of grandmothers in their particular familial situations; bring into view the strategies they used to manage their time, energy and emotions and show how they negotiate their position within their families.

### *Research Method*

My research questions required that I take individual women's stories as the main source of data, drawing on a qualitative research method to elicit these accounts. I decided to use loosely structured in-depth interviews to collect my data in order to allow interviewees the possibility of reflecting on their experience while trying to explain what it meant to them to be a grandmother. This research method was adopted in order to provide participants with an opportunity to tell their own stories in a way that felt appropriate for them. It was my intention that this method of interviewing would create an open, interactive process between researcher and interviewee.

I also used a questionnaire (see Appendix A) which was designed to be straightforward to obtain background demographic and biographical information about the interviewees and their families. I also envisaged the questionnaire being useful as an 'ice-breaker', allowing both myself and the interviewee, time to get to know each other before beginning the interview. The questionnaire provided information about the women's age, address, marital status, the age at which they had their last child, the age at which they became grandmothers, numbers of children and numbers of grandchildren, their proximity to their grandchildren (see Appendix B).

### *Research Sample*

In thinking about how to advertise for participants I was concerned about how to present myself and how to explain my position as a 'researcher'. I was aware that how I defined myself would be a major factor in whether or not the women I wanted to interview would choose to come forward. An association with a prestigious University, and a 'Women's Studies Department' could carry with it perceptions of what that person may or may not be like and might be seen as daunting and off putting to many participants. I was fearful that attaching such labels to myself might discourage many women from coming forward. I contacted the local newspaper asking if I could advertise for participants for my study. They offered to do an article on me as a mature student in a feature '*Taking a fresh view of later life*'. This article gave me the opportunity to reach another group of grandmothers who might be willing to be interviewed. I decided to emphasise my role as grandmother and was photographed with my grandson on my knee and was asked to hold up an academic book, which just happened to be Jennifer Mason's book on *Qualitative Researching*. I also placed posters in a local women's centre, three health centres, a university college notice board, a village church notice board, and notice boards in a town centre supermarket and two village stores. My aim was to access women from rural and urban areas in the locality of North Yorkshire. The posters were designed to try and attract attention, to be simple, 'friendly' and to the point (see Appendix D). I mentioned in the poster that I was a grandmother again, hoping to cash in on my 'insider' status. This was done quite consciously as I did not want the women to feel that they would not be able to relate to the researcher. The posters were printed in colour on A3 Paper and had been laminated to make them more durable. The intention was to place them in prominent places in order to access a cross section of the community. I was aware that this area does not have any sizeable ethnic communities and so was prepared for the probability that it was unlikely that I would be able

to include any ethnic diversity within my research. However, I hoped that by circulating publicity around general community venues, health care centres and local churches I would access the broadest section of people by class and ethnicity. I was aware that any study carried out in the mainly rural area of North Yorkshire could not be described as 'typical' of the UK generally, but also recognised that my focus on this mainly rural area would provide data on a fairly under-researched group of people.

### **The Research Process**

Initially seven women responded to the article in the newspaper. From the posters placed in the health centres, (one in a village surgery and two in the town) three respondents came forward, all of which came from the village surgery. The posters placed in the supermarket and the village stores provided no respondents. The poster in the village church notice board gained one respondent, the college notice board also provided one respondent, with a further two from the women's centre. Of the further eight women who took part in the project, two were women that were already known to me and the rest were gained through a snowballing technique (see Appendix E). Out of a total of twenty-two women who initially agreed to be interviewed, the stories from two of the women do not appear as data in this thesis. One woman was not in when I called to interview her. She had either changed her mind, simply forgotten or perhaps had a crisis. I did not contact this particular woman again as I did not want to risk embarrassing her. Another grandmother withdrew from the project after we had carried out the interview. This had been a particularly lengthy interview during which she had spoken about very difficult family situations that would have provided some very interesting data. The loss of these data to the project is regrettable, but part of the ethics of feminist research is to respect the wishes of the participants and so I have omitted her story

from my thesis. These two women were both contacts gained from the women's centre. It is hard to know whether this was coincidence or whether this venue was a space that supported women in difficult situations and/or crisis and therefore participants from this source were more likely to withdraw. Given that no other women came forward from this venue any conclusions remain speculative.

Five of the prospective interviewees from the newspaper article contacted me by telephone, one wrote to me and one approached me in the village. I contacted the women, whose names were given to me through other interviewees, by telephone. On my initial contact I introduced myself and explained the aim of my research and asked if they would be willing to speak to me about their experience as a grandmother. I explained that I was a grandmother myself and that I had returned late to education. I also detailed the purpose of my research, how the research findings might be used and the confidentiality of the research process. If the women agreed, at this point a place and date for an interview was arranged.

### *Pilot Study*

I conducted a pilot study with a work colleague to help me gauge how to carry out the interviews and provide the most conducive atmosphere for the research participants. I also used this opportunity to familiarise myself with the recording equipment and enable me to feel more relaxed while using the tape recorder and asking questions. I asked my colleague's opinion of the interview process and developed my technique and questioning according to some of her comments. She said that she enjoyed the experience of being able to talk freely, sharing her experiences with someone in a supportive, confidential atmosphere. She said she found the tape recorder rather inhibiting at the beginning

so I asked her how I might be able to prevent this being a problem for others. She said that she thought I should switch it on earlier while I was completing the questionnaire so that people got used to the tape recorder before they were actually being asked to express their thoughts in more depth. I decided not to do this as I felt that participants needed to know when they were speaking on or off the record. I also found that looking at a pre-recorded list of research questions was off putting both for myself and for the interviewee. I made the decision that I would only look at the research questions when the conversation began to dry up or, if the interviewees strayed well off the point. I decided to allow the interview to flow as naturally as possible following the women's stories and what seemed to be important to them about the experience of being a grandmother.

### **Understanding closeness: how close is too close?**

Avoiding the possibility of adopting a 'superordinate' position while remaining in control of the research process requires of the researcher continual reflexivity and self-awareness:

Qualitative research that problematizes meaning thus requires a rearrangement of both the relations of research and the subjective orientation of researchers. The nature of this rearrangement is a movement from distance to closeness: closeness to those one wishes to understand and closeness to oneself as a research instrument (Jaffe and Miller, 1994:57).

Throughout the research process I have attempted to maintain a balance between closeness to the participants and closeness to the research project and my own location within it while at other times being able to stand back in order to see the wider picture.

One of my major concerns in approaching my research has been how



to do my research without compromising either my interviewees or myself as researcher. I use the story of one of the participants, Doris, to illustrate the point. Doris was my first interviewee and it was through this initial experience with Doris that I came to re-examine problems of informed consent<sup>24</sup>. From my initial contact with Doris it soon became obvious to me that my relationship with her was not going to be a simple interviewer- interviewee relationship. Doris had a troubled family background and she felt that she needed someone to talk to outside the family and appeared to be hoping that I might become involved.

I could foresee many personal and ethical dilemmas for me arising out of what was a developing 'closeness' to Doris. With Doris in mind, in thinking about further interviews, I identified several concerns that needed to be addressed. The first concern was how close should I allow myself to become? I had great sympathy with Doris's situation, but I was apprehensive about how I would manage my research, and my life, if all twenty women had similar needs. The second problem was one of consent. Through informal meetings with Doris she was very enthusiastic about participating in my research. However, in agreeing to be interviewed I first needed to make it clear to Doris, and myself, what that meant and what it was that she and I had consented to. What was her understanding of the relationship? What did she think I had consented to as part of this relationship? What was her level of understanding of how I might use the information she gave me? Did she feel she was 'giving' me the information to do with as I wished?

Doris's account is a good example of the Pandora's box one opens when dealing with families. Her story highlights the sensitive ways in which researchers need to act when dealing with data that brings out

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<sup>24</sup> I learned a great deal from my pilot interview with Doris and interviewed her again later on as my interview skills improved.

deeply felt emotions and reveals family relations and family loyalties. The standard way to protect the identity of participants is to offer pseudonyms, but that is not always enough. It is often possible to identify individuals through other means. The researcher must therefore be constantly aware of what the consequences might be for individuals if their identities were revealed.

Judith Stacey (1988) talks about the dangers of exploiting interviewees and the risk of manipulation and betrayal of confidence. This draws attention to the importance of the power relations within the interview interaction and the need to protect the rights of participants (Stacey, 1988). Janet Finch (1984) points out that it needs to be acknowledged that there is a special trust that often develops between women interviewing women, and it is that trust which has the potential to be exploited. Thus there is a particular gendered element to interviewing as a research method. For many women, as in Doris's case, 'having someone to talk to' and most importantly to listen to them and take seriously what they have to say can be a very welcome change (Finch, 1984). In speaking to Doris I was aware that this trust had begun to develop very early in the relationship. It is evident that developing trust between the researcher and participants can result in an articulate and persuasive researcher encouraging participants to reveal more than they might have wished. How then should an interviewer deal with lines of enquiry once she becomes aware that what she has asked is leading her into difficult territory? How much should she *let* her interviewees tell her? To address these difficult questions I gave a great deal of serious consideration within the planning process, thinking about how to approach participants and the kinds of questions to ask.

### *Informed consent and confidentiality*

It is relatively easy to get participants to sign a consent form, especially when the researcher emphasises their sameness and empathises with their situation. However, gaining *informed* consent is a more complex process – something which I, as a feminist researcher was committed to negotiate. According to Faden and Beauchamp (1986) the key elements of gaining informed consent are: providing adequate information about the research; comprehension of the information by potential subjects; voluntary participation and the freedom to withdraw at any time without adverse consequences. Protecting the identity of the participants and confidentiality of the research data were important elements of the research process. It was made clear to participants that the interview tapes would be kept in a secure place and that only myself and my supervisor would have access to them. They were told that their identity would be protected at all times and that pseudonyms would be used when referring to them or any other members of their families; and that other ways of identifying them such as specific times, dates and places would not be referred to when discussing their individual stories. On first meeting the interviewees I introduced myself explaining my research topic, and my own position as a mother and a grandmother. The research process was outlined and the ethical procedure and the methods used to protect the confidentiality of the data were explained. It was explained that they were free to withdraw at any time, that if they did not wish to answer any of the questions that this was entirely their prerogative, and that if they wished to stop the interview at any time that this was also completely their choice. Participants were then asked to fill out a consent form (see Appendix F).

Through my contact with Doris I realised that I needed to factor into my research, methods of supporting participants through possible emotional distress raised through the interview process. I also needed

to think about how I would deal with difficult emotions myself. My approach was to be as empathetic and supportive as I could within the interview, offering a 'listening ear', both on and off the record, and to offer help by sourcing and directing individuals to areas of professional help. In Doris's case I directed her towards professional help for her grandson and herself, providing her with telephone numbers and addresses. My relationship with Doris also brought to light the problem of how, at the end of the interview sessions, having developed a level of rapport, the researcher leaves the relationship. To enter into someone's private life, raise thoughts and a discussion of a variety of issues, possibly disturb some forgotten feelings, and then to cut all ties is unacceptable. My approach was to keep in touch with all the participants through a kind of informal 'progress report' at Christmas 2002 and 2003.

I offered them the possibility of reading the transcripts and the final thesis. I was surprised that none of the women wished to read the transcripts, but nine wished to see a copy of the final thesis. It is unlikely that most of these women, if any, will have an idea of the size and density of a doctoral thesis, thus my offer to present them with a copy may be unrealistic at best, and even an empty gesture. However, I will be true to my word and circulate a copy among interested participants. During the research, I have made myself available to the women by leaving my telephone number in case they needed to know anything or had any further information that might be of interest. I have been contacted several times by different women. Lorna rang to let me know that her daughter had graduated and was going on to do a post graduate degree.; Helen and Maureen sent me cards to inform me that they had become grandmothers again; and Doris invited me to her husband's funeral. I have met Lorna and Doris for coffee and a chat on a number of occasions and we have in fact become friends. I have

come to realise that qualitative interviewing is difficult intellectually, practically, socially and ethically and that there are no definitive 'recipes' for how to do qualitative research. To carry out research as a feminist simply adds to the challenge.

### **Collecting the data**

After informed consent was negotiated I asked participants to fill out a basic factual questionnaire (see Appendix A). I asked the questions and filled in the information for the interviewees. The data from the questionnaire was utilised to provide a profile of the women (see Appendix B). This information was later entered onto an Excel spreadsheet and used to provide the information for illustrating the gap between children and grandchildren, the numbers of children and grandchildren, and to compare the marital status of grandmothers and middle generation. From the data entered onto the spreadsheet an overall profile of the women could be seen at a glance and therefore allowed any similarities and differences to readily emerge.

Information on the social class of interviewees was mostly drawn from the information given in the questionnaire (see Appendix B), in some cases however, participants self-defined their social class within the interview situation. However, I acknowledge that any method of identifying or labeling people by class has its limitations, and categorising women by class is particularly problematic (Abbott & Sapsford, 1987; Heath & Britten, 1983; Stanworth, 1984). It is common practice in many forms of class analysis for a woman's class position to be defined by the occupation of her husband (Goldthorpe, 1983). In this study I have chosen to use a method of defining the social class of the women interviewed through a combination of factors, that is, the participant's occupation and that of her partner's were looked at

together to create a more holistic categorisation of social class<sup>25</sup>. It was hoped that class as a variable might be helpful in understanding different attitudes or behaviors within this group of women. Once the Excel Spreadsheet was set up other information from the interviews was added as the research process continued to progress.

## Interviews

The body of the data was gathered through the taping of loosely structured, in-depth interviews that in most cases, took place in participants' homes or offices. However, in one case the interview was carried out at my office and in another at my home. In both of these cases this was because the women involved felt that their home environment would not have been conducive to their being able to talk freely.

In order to 'break the ice' and help relax and reassure participants I started each interview by asking the women to reflect upon how they felt when they first discovered that they were about to become a grandmother. The central research question was to understand what it *means* to interviewees to become a grandmother therefore, their responses to the news of the forthcoming birth of a grandchild was very illuminating in this respect. I found that this worked well, instantly getting them into a relaxed and easy frame of mind. I established that this was a good starting point, as the prospect of the birth of a grandchild was likely to have been an emotional moment and, something that they

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<sup>25</sup>This method of arriving at a social class categorization was adapted from Abbott and Sapsford (1987) together with Stanworth (1984) and Heath and Britten (1983), and takes the husband's and wife's occupations together as an indicator of class. As Stanworth argues, 'The conventional approach which relies on the occupation of the husband both obscures the extent to which the class experience of wives differs from that of husbands, and ignores the extent to which inequalities that divide women and men are themselves the outcome of the operation of the class system' (Stanworth 1984:159). Educational background and home ownership were also used as indicators.

remembered well. It also helped to bring into view the family and personal context of events. It was often at this point that I was asked about my own experience as a grandmother.

On meeting interviewees for the first time I had familiarised myself with the kinds of questions I wanted to ask (see Appendix G for list of interview questions) but aimed to allow the interview to flow along the lines of a natural conversation, picking up on interesting factors as they emerged from the women's stories, and trying to move the conversation on when participants wandered completely off track. I tried to make written or mental notes of anything of interest that took place when the tape was switched off or that could not be picked up by the interview. There were many factors in the homes of the women that I felt needed to be recorded in order to give a full picture of the women's lives. Very often things occurred 'off stage' that were interesting. I used my field notes to record 'off the record' and 'off stage' events. For example, in three cases the women's partners hovered around, either in the kitchen or passing through the room, clearly taking note of what was being said and, often interjecting with their own comments. In Maureen's case her husband did become involved in the discussion and, at one point, began to take over. This was quite a difficult situation to manage as it was the view of the grandmother that I wanted to uncover. However, it was also illuminating to see the way in which this particular couple interacted. While the husband was present the woman appeared to take a step back, allowing him the centre stage, but this was only the case on very general issues about society or moral values, but when anything was said about what was unmistakably *her* family, she made it very clear that she was the expert in this area. Her 'superior' knowledge was something to which her husband very quickly conceded.

In Angela's case her grandchildren were present for much of the time,

and, although this made the interview more difficult, it did show how this particular grandmother was able to carry out many functions at the same time and how she included her grandchildren in all aspects of her life. In this case her husband had been hovering in the background, when it became clear that it was not going to be possible for her to speak freely with the grandchildren around, she eventually asked her husband to take the grandchildren out to the park. The different persona of this particular woman, once her grandchildren were off the scene, quickly became apparent. She relaxed and as Finch (1984) found, clearly enjoyed the experience of speaking about herself. The ways in which women can slip in and out of roles, while not totally discarding any, was something that has become a central theme of my research findings.

My observations therefore, were important in providing this *extra* information which the interview tapes were not able to record. The notion of the 'family shrine' came to me when I observed, in almost every home, that family photographs were displayed in this way (see Illustration 3). The importance of 'the family' was signified in what could be described as homage to the family. Family events, births, marriages, graduations and other achievements were recorded and put on display for everyone to see. My research diary therefore became an important part of the research process recording those things that could not be seen or heard on the tape. My own feelings and reflexivity were entered into the research diary while my particular personal feelings as a grandmother were recorded in my own daily diary.

It was my intention that the interviews were conducted in such a way as to be experienced as an interactive process. For some of the women I felt that the process validated what they did as women in their everyday



**Illustration 3 The Family Shrine**



**The Author's Family Shrine**

lives. It gave them a voice that was heard, by me personally through listening and by academia through paying attention to their lives. It was often said that they were surprised that anyone would be interested in what they did and how they organised their lives. However, the interaction was at times intense and sometimes distressing for interviewees. My strategy was to stop the interview, switch off the tape, and have a break while the women were able to compose themselves. I tried to be supportive and offered to make tea or just listen. The interviews were only restarted if the women felt absolutely comfortable about resuming the process. The interview process was also stressful for me at times. On occasions I felt helpless, almost in a state of shock, after hearing some of the heartrending stories of this particular group of women. I was saddened, even angry at times, by the fact that some of the women were being placed in such difficult situations, sometimes by their families, sometimes by the state, and that they felt that they had no choice but to 'just had to get on with it'. I recorded my feelings in my research diary and tried to reflect upon the situations I had experienced. I considered whether or not the women involved actually thought of their circumstances as 'oppressive' or whether they had a different, but equally valid view, seeing their position as one of importance and strength within their families.

Although there were several questions that were common to all the interviews, I took the position that it was the participants who were the authority on their own lives, and so allowed the conversations to flow, often following lines of thought as they arose during the interviews. The complexity of everyday family life and how these affect individuals often became very apparent in such situations. It was made clear to individuals that anything they said 'off the record' would not be used in the data, and that if they wished to retract anything they had said during the interviews then this was entirely their choice.

The length of interviews varied from two to three and a half hours. What was surprising for me was the ease at which most of the women spoke about their experiences and how happy they were to carry on talking well after the taped interview had finished. While these 'off the record' conversations could not be used as data, they revealed certain general issues that helped guide me in later interviews and in my overall analysis of the data. Conducting the interviews in this loose, flexible way, in an informal setting, provided me with very rich data. All of the women interviewed were very willing to talk about the experience of being a grandmother and were able to reflect about many aspects of their lives and how their experiences so often 'depended' on so many things outside of their control. The complexity of their lives and the strategies they used to organise the diverse aspects of their lives as older women emerged from the different layers of meaning within the interview data. How I analysed the complexity of the data is discussed below.

### **Past, present and future coming together**

The relations in which our everyday worlds are embedded (Smith, 1988) includes our deep-rooted connectivity to our individual biography, our past and present family relations set within the context of socio-cultural change and historical time. Our everyday experiences and practices as women are set within the social context in which we now live *and* our past history. As Chambers argues when discussing widowhood in later life:

Experience is not static; it is in the present but it is also in the past. It is something that happens but it is also the process of something happening. ....It is, therefore, past and present coming together' (Chambers, 2000:133).

By adopting a feminist life course perspective, I have been able to link together the construction of older women's identity as grandmothers as

constituted through their gender and generation and experienced within an individual biography, the society in which we live, and historical time (Browne, 1998; Bernard et al., 2000; Calasanti and Slevin, 2001).

Taking a life course approach shifts the focus from definitive fixed stages of life to more fluid transitions (Hareven, 1978). A life course perspective is 'more individual in its emphasis, more appreciative of difference and variation and... [is more] concerned with linking historical time and individual biography as with tracing individual progressions though particular typified stages' (Morgan, 1985:178). Taking a developmental view of an individual throughout their life course reveals the complexity of subjectivity, as Morgan (1996) states:

Individuals do not simply move from stage to stage or through a series of transitions. They also carry with them memories, selective and distorted, of earlier transitions and times, relating to their own life-courses and those of others. Thus, rather than a simple set of moves from past to present to future, we have a series of continually modified interactions between present, selected past and projected futures (Morgan, 1996:144).

Following Morgan's notion of 'continually modified interactions between present, selected pasts and projected futures' (ibid 1996:144) I place women's experience at the centre, using women's stories to understand what it means to be a grandmother at this particular point in time. As Bernard et al (2000) state, 'a central concern of the life-course approach revolves around personality: in our case, what it means to be a woman in general, and an ageing woman in particular' (Bernard et al., 2000:13). Any study of how individuals experience life events, in this case becoming a grandmother, must be placed in the context of those individual family and historical experiences that have fashioned their previous lives. Different generations will have different perspectives on family life and diverse cohorts will perhaps have varied beliefs in relation to situations affecting understandings and meanings that in turn affect practices. Taking particular relevant points in the life course of

individual women, re-visiting memories, reflecting on the significance of events and analysing the ways in which such practices construct later experience, is central to the way in which this research has been conducted.

## **Reflexivity**

However, applying a feminist life course perspective to this research project has not been without its problems. I did not become aware of the need to take this approach until I had already formulated much of my theoretical approach and my research questions and begun my interviews. It was not until I attended an International Symposium *Reconceptualising Gender and Ageing*<sup>26</sup> that I became cognisant with a critical gerontological approach, and in particular a feminist life course approach: I realised that by linking gender and ageing through adopting a feminist life course approach (Browne, 1998; Bernard et al., 2000; Calasanti and Slevin, 2001) that I would be able to gain a more complete understanding of the experience of being a grandmother.

It was unfortunate however, that I had conducted my interviews before I attended the International Symposium on Gender and Ageing therefore, a feminist life course approach was not something that I can *name* as integral to planning my research process. However, it became clear from the outset that both myself and the women interviewees had 'instinctively' taken up this position, that is, recognising that our lives as women are conducted on many levels and are connected with the lives of significant others in the past, present and future. The participants reflected upon their lives and spoke about future aspirations in a way

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<sup>26</sup> The International Symposium 'Reconceptualising Gender and Ageing' took place at the University of Surrey 25-27 June, (2002) hosted by Sara Arber, Department of Sociology. The programme took a broad approach to ageing looking at gender and identity, intimacy, autonomy, time, social networks, caring, health, gender roles and generational differences.

that constantly linked backwards and forwards, not only reflecting on their own lives, but also on those of other family members. They continually placed their answers to questions within the context of their family lives and socio-cultural change, making connections between life events and popular cultural discourses that propose ways of being. They often constructed their answers as 'dependent' upon different situations and contexts. As Jaber Gubrium (1993) noted when discussing research on the meaning of house and home among older people, responses given were often answers that were 'evidently in the making'. Gubrium suggests that 'the social organisation of this answer-in-the-making might tell me a great deal about how experience is given voice' (1993:48). The response and the context of what participants' stories 'depend' on is vital in any understanding of the meaning attached to any given situation. The ambiguous and contradictory nature of the answers given *depended* on the context of the question asked, and the ways in which individual women constructed their answers emerged as important themes in my analysis of the data.

Age, both in terms of chronological age and the particular cohort an individual belonged too, contextualised experience. As grandmothers some may still be young, in their thirties, many will be middle-aged and some will be 'old' and nearing the end of their lives. Without deliberately trying, I now realise that I intuitively understood that I needed to adopt an approach that would allow the complex gerontology of the experience of being a grandmother to emerge. Adopting a feminist life course approach legitimated gender as an over-arching factor influencing an individual's choices and experience throughout the life course. A life course perspective revealed the connectedness of familial relations over time. Thus, the grandmothers' location in historical time, set within the context of socio-cultural change, emerged as central themes of my analysis.

## **Transcribing and Data Analysis**

Initially I began to transcribe the interviews verbatim myself, but as this process was so time-consuming, I had a third of the tapes transcribed professionally. In order to help with the analysis and coding of the data each line was numbered and matched to the numbering on the tape machine at regular intervals. The transcriptions retained as much of the original speech as possible. Punctuation was included to aid the reading of the material and codes were added to indicate participants' changes in emphasis, intonation and pauses in actual speech (see Appendix H). Spaces for comments and coding were left in the margins at either side of the text.

I began coding and identifying themes during the process of transcribing. As Tom Wengraf (2001) states, the process of transcribing and generating ideas should not be experienced as separate tasks:

*'The tape will always wait patiently to be transcribed; the ideas that spring from you as you write will vanish quickly. This way the inevitable 'drudgery' of transcribing will be subsumed into the highly creative one-shot activity of what is the equivalent of a depth interview of yourself as you experience the transcribing of the tape' (Wengraf, 2001: 210).*

During the process of transcribing the themes began to emerge from the data and were recorded on the transcripts and in my research diary.

**Table 2 Emergent Themes**

<p><b>Generalised characteristics of the women:</b> Biographical and demographic details (these were taken from the interviews and questionnaire).</p>
<p><b>What the grandmothers did:</b> Practical matters, time spent on grandchildren, whether they were remunerated, whether grandchildren came to them, geographical proximity.</p>
<p><b>Time:</b> How the grandmothers utilised their time: time as a family resource, time as a gift, work and family time. Grandmothers' experience of time passing, different generation, different perspective.</p>
<p><b>Circumstances of the middle generation:</b> The impact of divorce, teenage mothers, working mothers and life style of the middle generation on the role grandmothers played in their families.</p>
<p><b>What being a grandmother meant:</b> Grandmothers' understanding of the role: Ideal model. How it was experienced: as pleasure, a sacrifice, a burden, ambiguities of responses.</p>
<p><b>Why the grandmothers were prepared to do what they did:</b> The circumstances of their families and past experience of family role models. Family expectations, duty and obligation. Social and cultural expectations and the influence of discourses of motherhood</p>

Family circumstances were identified as an overall theme affecting the relationship with several sub categories such as divorce, teenage mothers and the work patterns of both the grandmother and parents of



the child. Time and its usage and meaning was another theme that was broken down into different aspects such as time as a resource, time as a gift, and time passing, as in growing older.

The ambiguity of responses, and sometimes contradictions in individual reports of events or experiences also emerged as an interesting theme to bring out of the data. I made notes to myself in my research diary about why this might be the case. The context of how events were remembered and how responses were constructed within different contexts became important aspects of the analysis. The themes that participants mentioned were then broken down into their component parts providing a deeper level of analysis.

I chose not to use Qualitative Data Analysis Software such as Atlas to code my interview data. Instead my preferred method of analysis was to listen and re-listen to my original data, making comments and coding the information directly onto the transcripts and also, where applicable, onto an Excel data base. I utilised literal, interpretive and reflexive readings of the data (Mason, 1996) drawing out themes and making connections as well as noticing areas of incongruence. I started coding the data by sets of family circumstances that emerged as factors influencing the experience and practice of grandmothering. For example, divorce, the age of the grandchild's mother, lifestyle choices and material circumstances of the parent or parents were identified, and added to the Excel data base. Those grandmothers who were caring for their grandchildren while the mother or father worked were identified and then this category was broken down again to show the family circumstances, for example whether patterns of care were due to divorce, the mother or father being a single parent, material circumstances or personal choice. This literal reading of the data, provided a general biography of the women (see Appendix C), their

family circumstances, general health, social class, working lives, leisure activities, and what the women actually did for their grandchildren. This provided the first level of analysis.

Having discovered *who* the women were and what the women *did* as grandmothers the next stage of the analysis was to go deeper into the interview material and find out what being a grandmother *meant* to the women and *why*. The dominant norms and ways of being associated with how women should behave were laid alongside the women's personal stories, history and family background in order to see whether their reported experiences reflected, or drew upon, established discourses of motherhood, grandmotherhood or femininity. This process was the start of a more interpretive reading of the data aimed at teasing out the *meaning* of grandmothing.

A feminist life course perspective was applied to the data as a tool that would allow the connectedness and multi-layered nature of women's identities to be brought into the picture. The timing of becoming a grandmother and where it was positioned in an individual woman's life course were identified and recorded as possible influencing factors. Reflecting back on my research method, I realise that if I had observed the women in their homes and/or asked them to keep diaries, then this would have added another layer of complexity to the data. I think that this would have revealed aspects of the women's lives that listening to interview tapes cannot make visible. In particular a 'time diary' of the women's daily activities would have been a very good source of supplementary information making visible the ways in which women multi-task. It would also have been useful in showing their use of time, both as a 'resource' and as a 'gift'.

I was concerned from the beginning about the possible temptation of making over-stated generalisations in order to prove a point and/or making connections that too readily fit with theory or personal hunches. To try and avoid this overdetermination of data I included women's ambiguity of responses in different situations. I subsequently identified ambiguity and inconsistency as themes that were located in the women's conflicting allegiances to discourses of childhood, motherhood and femininity and changing attitudes to family life and women's roles within it. Women's reflexivity, as they related their stories, also surfaced as an important theme. This was linked to discourses associated with common-sense understanding of psychological theory, child development and self-help literature.

My analysis of the data has been literal and interpretive; however I recognise that my readings of the data are inherently subjective (Mason, 1996). My insider knowledge does not automatically grant me epistemological privilege that can be generalised to count for the experience of others. My understanding of a particular caring relation as oppressive, for another woman might be experienced as 'belonging and being needed'. As Mason (1996) points out, it is problematic to assume:

...that the experience of a form of oppression by an individual researcher unquestionably gives that researcher insider knowledge of such oppression as it is experienced by everyone else (Mason, 1996:151).

In discussing how I analysed and interpreted my data I have attempted to be reflexive, making visible my reasoning for choosing the research subject, how the research questions evolved, my methodological approach, and my choice of research method. The interviewer/interviewee relationship is at issue too, just being a woman interviewing a woman, or a grandmother interviewing a grandmother,

does not mean that there are not certain power dynamics at work (Tang, 2002). Being reflexive about possible power dynamics that exist within the interview encounter is something that I have consistently tried to do.

Notwithstanding these epistemological reservations, I firmly believe that my method of collecting the data did bring together an abundance of rich data. The willingness of the women to share their stories with me was humbling and a privilege. I have tried to do justice to their stories by constantly reflecting on my interpretations and, by being accountable for any conclusions that I might have drawn from them.

# Chapter 4

## The Grandmothers: Demographical, Biographical and Familial Context

The aim of this chapter is to bring the women in this study to life. This introduction to the participants brings some of the diversities and commonalities of their lives into view. In this chapter I prepare the groundwork for Chapter Five, which explores what they do as grandmothers, and Chapter Six, that discusses the process of *being a grandmother*. It is by weaving together the many layers of the participant's lives that the complex and fluid picture of what it means to *be a grandmother* at the beginning of the twenty first century begins to emerge.

### Characteristics of the grandmothers

In order to introduce the grandmothers in this study, Appendix B provides a demographic profile of the participants, and Appendix C gives a brief thumbnail sketch of each of the grandmothers. Pseudonyms for the grandmothers and any other people referred to by them are used throughout the thesis and any specific identifying details disguised. This chapter outlines their demographic details showing their marital status; their age at the time of the interview and the particular cohort they belong to; the age at which they first became grandmothers; their numbers of children and grandchildren; their geographical proximity to their grandchildren; their employment status and that of their husbands; their social class and their personal health details. This preliminary information is drawn in part from the interviews, and in part from the questionnaire, and together forms the framework for the findings in this chapter. First I will begin by looking at their marital status and compare this with that of their children.

## Marital Status

Out of the twenty women interviewed, seventeen were married<sup>27</sup>, all to their original partners, two were widowed and one was separated. All but one of the married women said that they were settled and secure in their relationships. This figure contrasts significantly with the marital status of the parents of the grandchildren. Although nearly half of the parents are married, twelve are divorced, with five co-habiting and four living as single women having neither married nor co-habited with the father of their child.

**Table 3 Marital Status of Grandmothers and Parents of Grandchild**

	Married	Divorced/ separated	Widowed	Co- habiting	Single not co- habiting
<b>Grand- mothers</b> n = 20	17	1	2*	0	0
<b>Parents</b> n = 40	19	12	0	5	4

\*1 grandmother was separated before she was widowed.

However, it would appear that marriage is still popular, with thirty-one out of the forty parents of the grandchildren having chosen to marry. This would seem to confirm the views of sociologists who argue that relationships are no longer understood to be for life (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Kate had experienced marital problems prior to the birth of her first grandchild and was still in the process of reconciling differences in her marriage. Her relationship became a significant issue at the time of the birth of her first granddaughter:

*Kate:* ... my husband and I, who were then estranged, actually went down to the hospital to sort of wait for the arrival of the baby....As I say,

<sup>27</sup> Two of the women, Doris and Maureen, have been widowed since the interviews were carried out.

my husband and I were separated at that time and then, just after Hannah was born we got back together, ...so that was all sort of going on.> We actually got together just before she got christened,<sup>^</sup> in fact the week-end she got christened – so, yes I am sure the whole process of grandparenthood was actually instrumental in bringing us back together again .... Yeah. You know, because we sort of shared so much in this way and sort of finally>... it certainly helped I think>.

Int. To make bridges – bring you together<sup>^</sup>.

*Kate*: Yeah that's right – it did make it easier. (Kate, aged 55).

[Note: the symbols used are as follows:

^ Intonation rises.

> Intonation falls.

\_\_\_ Stressing a point.

.... Pause while thinking in seconds.

(...) Description or explanation of something not audible].

For this couple the birth of their first grandchild appeared to be significant in bringing to their attention the things they shared, allowing them to put their differences behind them. Kate's telling of their story would seem to show that becoming grandparents, for them, was clearly a turning point and a time for re-evaluating their own relationship and its meaning.

All but one woman, Emma, had been married for over twenty years. Being part of a long-term relationship affects how people experience life. Those women who were in long-term settled relationships often answered my questions using the term 'we'. This was despite being asked for their personal experience. Connie and her husband had been married for thirty-two years, and, when asked to describe how she felt when her first step-grandchild was born she replied:

*Connie*: Excited. Er...we were there ...well she knew we were coming down, yeh, she knew we were going down but we worked it in with his parents as well, if I remember ... We stayed until she came home, that's right we did. We stayed until she

came home so we would be there about 4 – 5 days. (Connie, aged 56).

Emma when discussing her fears about becoming a grandmother and the problems she had with her daughter, constantly moved backwards and forwards between the 'I' and the 'we':

*Emma:* Jack and I both felt that probably, er... we just felt that we'd done as much as we could for Julie, > and she was beginning to get quite independent, so we kind of felt we'd been pushed into a particular set of circumstances that we didn't really want to be put into. Er...I mean, as a mum I always really tried to encourage^ Julie to be more independent. We were having lots of problems with Julie, so she wasn't the ideal role model for a mum at all^ so I had a great deal of misgivings>. (Emma, aged 42).

For those women who were in long-term relationships, which in this research was the majority, thinking in terms of 'I' appeared to be uncharacteristic. As mothers and grandmothers their lives were constantly inter-linked with other family members therefore, to be asked to speak about the self as an individual, without reference to their partners, their children or grandchildren, was probably unusual. This is a theme that I will return to several times in this thesis.

The importance and the security of having living grandparents who were still a couple was referred to as a benefit for grandchildren, especially where they were being brought up in households that were not seen as 'ideal' by the grandmother:

*Emma:* I think it's very important that Jack and I maintain a united front. I think, marriage to me is very important and that again is top of the list that my commitment to Jack, and his commitment to me, is beyond er...beyond anybody^, kind of like, touching that. You know, I think if the commitment is showing a value^, you know, marriage is showing a value, and I would like to think that, to bring Kyle up to an understanding that marriage is a lifetime^ commitment, I think it would be very important.



However, Emma then goes on to consider how much influence they can realistically have when their grandchild is living an environment that does not follow this set of values:

*Emma:* But then again it's going to be his er...you know he'll base things on what he's learning, and I don't think Julie has given him a very good beginning^ really (laughs), but I think she does regret that she's having two children to two different fathers^. I don't think that's showing very much>...so probably the commitment that Jack and I have, and the family unit that we have, is probably very important.

Emma is clearly stating the value she places on marriage and the family unit. Voicing her worries about her daughter's relationships in this way shows the concerns she has for the effects this may have on her grandchild. Later in the interview she reflects upon her own daughter's childhood. Her daughter had been brought up in a 'committed' family unit, but had become a difficult, rebellious child. Emma's analysis of her own mothering is brought out in the discussion in Chapter Six in relation to discourses surrounding 'good enough' mothering. However, generally, my participants' stories seemed to confirm that they held the same views as those politicians and many childcare professionals who put forward continuity and stability in families as one of the vital ingredients, not only for raising children, but also for a stable society. On the two occasions when grandfathers took part in the conversation, the importance of stability in family life for children following divorce was discussed. Mary first took care of her grandson, now age thirteen, from his being a baby so that his mother could work and, then later resumed her care following the divorce of her son and his wife:

*Mary:* Children need a loving family atmosphere I think. I have him here right up to the present day really. He knows he has his room here and is always welcome. You know, I mean, when he was little, er when he started school, by that time his mum and dad had split up, but I had him every single weekend. He used to come down, and his dad used to come here, and we had him Friday till Monday. So, I more or less brought him up^, right from him being born, and he still comes now^. Even after school he'll pop in. Because his mum doesn't live - she doesn't live close, so you know, I just have him all the time^. (Mary, aged 61).

There is an underlying narrative running through Mary's words, without explicitly being said, that she is proud of her role as a grandmother in caring for her grandson and providing him with, what she feels every child needs, 'a loving family atmosphere'. The understanding of how damaging not having stability and continuity can be for children is clear in Maureen's story:

*Maureen:* ...and then she moved and met another man and he was from another area of (W) so she changed council house to the area where he came from and then she kicked him into touch and went to live in another council house – she changed houses a few times, so the children, you can imagine what was going on for these kids, you know, in fact, I think she will have been married four times now. Umm, this last one, she is still with him, she settled with him, they have all been younger than her, but umm, because of all this that's been going on – and living on council estates – she just used to wake them up on a morning and say 'get yourself up – get yourself to school', she never took them to school – they took themselves to school – they washed their selves – then they got their breakfast – so of course he [her grandson] was mixing with children> - he was going into shops - he was stealing out of shops> – when he was little, tiny little boy – and er, he never looked well>....and Charlie used to wet the bed all the time. (Maureen, aged 65).

Such a strongly worded account illustrates the importance Maureen places on the negative effects of multiple relationships and the effect of what she clearly identifies as 'poor mothering' on her grandson's childhood. There is a sense here that class, or at least a materially deprived environment, is also being targeted as a factor but, as Maureen sees it, the blame for her grandson's problems is placed on the mother and her many relationships. Recognising this, and feeling that they could offer a better alternative, is the reason why she and her husband were prepared to take on the full-time care of their grandson (this is discussed in more detail later in the chapter).

The benefits for teenage mothers of living with parents who could offer a stable home life and financial support was something that Lorna remarked upon:

*Lorna:* We have not been a couple that have been bothered about going out a lot – so quite often on a week-end, ... if Jenny wanted to go out on a weekend I really didn't mind .....so, she has benefited a lot^ I suppose from being at home with us. If she'd been in a flat on her own she wouldn't have had half^ the freedom really, and she had had the time as I say, for her studies.

However, the downside of this is that the pressures on the couple are often considerable:

*Lorna:* I mean sort of I look at err Garry and myself and I think well, it is hard work as a couple you know, having your granddaughter at home as well, you know, because uhm she takes a lot of time out of our time. (Lorna, aged 47).

Two of the women, Betty and Jess, were widowed. For Betty, living in close proximity to her family and being part of their lives was very important:

*Betty:* I think it's being a part of something especially now I've lost my husband. I think I'd be very^, well I don't think I know it, I'd be very lonely without them. Like the weekend ... as I say, I try to keep out of the way at weekends. Like my daughter, she knows, she says 'Well I can always tell by your voice mum', and as I say, if it wasn't for them I'd be a lonely person I really^ would. Because Jim and I did everything together ... You know, we were very close>. (Betty, aged 69).

Jess had been widowed for five years and had been separated from her husband for some years before her husband's death. She was a devout Catholic and did not believe in divorce. She lived away from her grandchildren, and although she stayed in contact with them through the telephone, she did not appear to need such geographical closeness, or being part of the everyday lives of her grandchildren for her own well-being.

*Jess:* I ring them several times a week and go over there at holiday times, and sometimes for birthdays, but I have a very full

life here and the church is very important to me too – but that's always been the case.

Jess's marriage had not been a happy one and for the most part it seemed that she and her husband had lived quite separate lives:

*Jess:* We did our own things most of the time, me with the church and him with the pub – that was his religion. (Jess, aged 76).

Jane was separated from her husband. They had lived separate lives for many years but had not divorced. She was an independent woman with many interests who didn't seem to need her husband or include him when she spoke about her grandchildren. When referring to them it was always from her perspective:

*Jane:* I'm really so lucky, my grandchildren are all really good,... they have never been any trouble to me, and they still come to see me and remember me... they send me cards from all over. They are all really clever... at University and things, or got their own business – I'm a great grandmother too – did I tell you<sup>^</sup>. I'm really proud of them all. (Jane, aged 82).

It is difficult to ascertain from this particular group of women whether their marital status brings any different meaning to the experience of being a grandmother. The women's attitudes and values were clearly in favour of long-term stable relationships and the importance of 'the family unit'; however, it would be interesting to see how women who chose *not* to be in long-term relationships might have reacted to grandmotherhood and the concurrent demands that might be placed on them. Jess and Jane were separated from their husbands but, having chosen not to divorce, but this reflects their strong religious views on the sanctity of marriage (both women were deeply religious) and does not appear to show any significant differences in their attitudes towards their grandchildren. They were perhaps marginally more distant in their approach to their grandchildren, and neither spoke in a way that showed that they would feel lonely without their grandchildren, but they were also the oldest of the women interviewed - Jane was born in 1919 and Jess was born in 1925; their life experiences would have been very

different from those of the younger grandmothers and this may have been a more significant factor in forming attitudes and styles of grandmothers.

As a group marriage and traditional ideas of 'a close family unit' - including the support of extended kin - was the model of family life that they drew on for bringing up children. This was despite the fact that the women belonged to different cohorts, meaning that their formative years were in very different historical times (see Table 4). Therefore it would seem reasonable to assume that they might adopt quite different attitudes and values in many aspects of their lives. All of the grandmothers, however, placed the same value on the importance of a stable family life. Their observations on the changes in attitudes of today's young women towards marriage, family, and relationships, is something that is raised several times throughout this thesis.

#### *Divorce and generational differences*

Divorce is now a common feature in many families, and this is reflected by my data. While most of the grandmothers had remained married to their original spouses, out of the total sample of twenty grandmothers half had married children who had divorced. These patterns, of course, say little about the quality of the relationships or the reasons why these couples have stayed together; however, divorce, and the problems of childcare for the mothers left on their own, can be identified as a major issue in this study. Half of the grandmothers are involved with caring for their grandchildren as a direct result of the problems arising from the divorce of their own children. The problems experienced by the parent(s) separating and reforming new relationships can also limit the contact between grandmother and grandchild (Dench and Thomson, 1999). However, this was not a significant issue in my research. None of the women reported not being able to have access to their grandchildren as a result of divorce. Although Maureen and Doris had not maintained their relationships with their step-grandchildren following divorce, this was not reported to be a significant factor.

### **Age as a significant factor: Displacing the myths**

Contrary to many stereotypical ideas of grandmothers as being aged, white haired and disengaged from society, in keeping with recent studies, only one of the participants became a grandmother outside the forties to early fifties age range (Smith and Cowie, 1991; Troll, 1995; Szinovacz, 1998). The youngest grandmother at the time of interviewing was forty-two years of age with the eldest being eighty-two. Jane, the eldest of the group, had been a grandmother for thirty years of her life, with the last two having accorded her the status of a great-grandmother. Many of the women's families consisted of four generations, with Faith, (aged 53) belonging to a five-generation family. Belonging to a different generation will change a woman's perspective on her own life and that of her family. These are all factors that interact at different levels influencing how a life is experienced and lived. Many of the women spoke about the different perspective being a grandmother brought to the way they were with their grandchildren in contrast to the way they were with their own children (see Chapter Five). Being a member of a different generation and growing older had brought a more relaxed attitude and an understanding that giving of their time was the most important thing.

### *Cohort Differences*

The particular cohort to which a woman belongs has significance for both her experience and practice as a grandmother. When she was born will have been of vital importance in forming her attitudes and value judgements throughout her life course. The expectations of a life as a woman for Jane born in 1919 compared with those of Emma born forty years later will be very different, which may affect the experience and practice of being a grandmother. This variable has been factored into the analysis when listening to their stories and is discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.

**Table 4 Grandmothers by Birth Cohort in Decades**

1910-1920	1920-1930	1930-1940	1940-1950	1950-1960
Jane	Jess	Betty Mary Doris Maureen Susan	Angela Connie Dianne Faith Gayle Helen Phyllis Irene Kate Laura	Emma Gill Lorna

**Table 5 Gap in Years between Birth of Last Child and First Grandchild**

Pseudonym	Age	Age last child born	Age of grandmother	Gap in years
Angela	52	25	48	23
Betty	69	40	43	3
Connie	56	25	51	26
Diane	56	20	44	24
Emma	42	25	40	15
Faith	53	25	50	25
Gayle	53	24	43	19
Helen	54	37	50	13
Jess	76	28	58	30
Mary	61	22	47	25
Phyllis	58	25	44	19
Irene	53	32	47	15
Jane	82	38	52	14
Kate	55	28	50	22
Lorna	47	31	44	13
Maureen	65	34	46	12
Susan	65	32	58	26
Laura	60	27	50	23
Gill	51	22	36	14
Doris	63	26	45	19

The average age at which this particular group of women first became grandmothers was forty-seven. This would appear to follow the trend

revealing the potential for grand motherhood to continue over a considerable part of the life course (Kornhaber, 1996; Dench et al., 1999). The earliest age at which any of the women became a grandmother was thirty-six (Gill was a teenage mother as was her daughter) and the oldest, Susan, was fifty-eight (see Table 5). The age at which this group of women gave birth to their last child varied between twenty and forty years of age. The number of years between the birth of their last child, and the birth of their first grandchild, varied between three years and twenty six years with the average being nineteen. For many of the women then, the period of time between not having dependent children and becoming grandmothers was not very long; for some this child-free time did not exist; she experienced bringing her youngest child up almost as a sister to her first grandchild. Betty was 43 years old when her first grandchild was born and her youngest daughter was only three years old. Betty recalled this as a time that brought her and her daughter together:

*Betty:* May and I became much closer, I think because the two children used to play together. Because at that time, funnily enough my husband had just come out of the Navy and we bought a house at (.....), quite near my daughter's, and I used to see her everyday so I used to take the pair of them down to the beach and it was good<sup>^</sup>. They were more like little sisters. (Betty, aged 69).

For Lorna, having her teenage daughter at home with her baby at the same time as her two other teenage children required some major adjustments to her family life. Her youngest son was thirteen when her first grandchild arrived. Lorna recalled her concern for her son at this time:

*Lorna:* Steve, I feel a little bit for as well because he's my baby really – and he has had to take a bit of a back seat because of Megan<sup>^</sup> coming in – he's – I mean – he was quite jealous to start with – which I didn't think he would be – and I think it's because she had come in and taken over the role [of baby]– you know – and I suppose she was getting my attention – [he] was coming up thirteen when she came in – so he was still only quite young his self and I mean he is like a big brother<sup>^</sup> with her, I mean, I feel myself that I don't give him as much attention as I should.



For both these women having young children themselves at the time of becoming a grandmother created a situation where their children and their grandchildren were more like siblings. The expected age gap between the two generations was not in place. This factor in itself did not seem to be the problem but, for Lorna, having three generations living in the same household was at times very stressful. The demands on her attention and time had to be split between two generations of children and her husband.

Lorna explained that the effects on her relationship with her own children and her husband were considerable; her youngest child had not had enough attention; her middle daughter had left home sooner than she had anticipated, and her relationship with her husband had come under strain:

*Lorna:* I mean you need the odd time as a couple together<sup>^</sup>, whereas to have a conversation in the house it's err, at one stage, it was just near impossible<sup>^</sup> you know, and actually I thought that was quite pressurised on our marriage as well. (Lorna, aged 47).

*Timing: Becoming a grandmother 'off time' or 'on time'*

Any analysis that attempts to understand what it means to be a grandmother cannot ignore the importance of the *timing* of events within any individual's life-course (Yeandle, 1987) and as can be seen from the stories above, the life-course of significant others:

The timing of an event may be as consequential for life experience as whether the event occurs and the degree or type of change (Hareven, 1978:21).

When asked how they felt when they first learned that they were going to become grandmothers the replies were mixed. Some of the women felt that they were to become grandmothers too young. Gill, who became a grandmother at the age of thirty-six, when asked if she felt

that thirty-six was too young to become a grandmother she replied:

*Gill:* Yes, but saying that I had Cathy young, so it was exactly the same situation, so I wasn't going to give my views on it because I'd done exactly the same<sup>^</sup>. (Gill, aged 51).

Diane who became a grandmother at the age of forty-four said:

*Diane:* I was quite shocked really ... not because I should have been but er, I just felt too young to be a grandma.

When asked if she thought there was an ideal age at which to become a grandmother she replied:

*Diane:* Well I suppose as long as I wasn't a grandma before I was forty I was quite happy about it (laughs). (Diane, aged 56).

Doris, in reply to the same question, said:

*Doris:* Then I thought it was automatic that you was a grandmother when you was older .....sort of fifty to sixty. (Doris, aged 63).

Contained within these statements there appears to be an understanding that there is a prescribed age at which it is considered right and proper to become a grandmother. However, age is a difficult concept to define in terms of when in fact a person becomes old and, in this case, old enough to become a grandmother. The issue of how old a person *feels* is a very individual matter (Thompson et al., 1990). Gill's embarrassment at becoming a grandmother in her thirties, Diane's shock at becoming a grandmother at forty-four and Doris's statement that she was 'only forty-five', would seem to indicate that there is, perhaps, a commonly understood preferred age at which to become a grandmother. However, as the average age at which this group of women became grandmothers was forty-seven, it would seem that the age at which Diane and Doris became grandmothers did not fall far outside the norm.

Jane experienced becoming a grandmother at what she perceived as a

'good time'. She was happy for her daughter who was married and settled and, although Jane had one daughter still living at home, she felt:

*Jane:* I was old enough to be happy about the arrival of a new generation' (Jane, aged 82).

For Emma the experience was not so positive. Her daughter was fifteen and still at school, and therefore the timing of becoming a grandmother, for her, was definitely 'off-time'. Emma was considering developing a career and was not thinking about taking on the responsibility and anxiety of another generation and, importantly, this was not what she wanted for her daughter. When asked how she felt she said:

*Emma:* I think probably shock and horror to begin with. (Emma, aged 42).

When Doris was asked how she felt when she was told that she was about to become a grandmother, she reported that her initial response was not good:

*Doris:* I was horrified because I was only forty-five and I wanted to go to work and didn't want to be a grandmother at the time... so I wasn't thinking, looking forward to being a grandmother because I'm not old^ yet.

Doris clearly did not feel old enough to become a grandmother and saw being forty-five as a time when she could begin a new stage of her life and hopefully find employment. Maybe she saw this as a 'time for herself', now that her family were grown and had less need of her. An interesting issue raised by Doris is that she felt that her wish to 'go to work' would in some way have been put in jeopardy by her becoming a grandmother. It becomes clearer later in the interview just why Doris felt that her chance to start work might have been thwarted. Doris's major concern was her daughter's future - she had just finished Sixth-form College:

*Doris:* I felt at the time that she hadn't had any life - she was studying - been at school all that time - and then she was looking

forward to going to teacher training college - we had been to see the place - it was wonderful^ - but it all changed as quick as that ... (long pause) I felt they were going to struggle> - which they did. (Doris, aged 63).

The sadness in Doris's voice was clearly audible when she spoke about this time in her life. Doris felt that her daughter was too young to get married and start a family and was concerned that she herself might be called on to help, which indeed she was. Doris was not unusual in understanding her role as a mother as one of being supportive of her daughter, even though such actions meant that her own wish to find paid employment would be sacrificed, or at least put on hold. This was not an uncommon feeling. Maureen and Phyllis had both given up part-time work to care for their grandchildren and Connie had felt that perhaps it would have been better for her grandson if she had.

Listening to Doris's story, it appears that becoming a grandmother occurred at an important juncture in her life-course. Her personal needs/time conflicted with the needs/time of her family. Her choice to support her daughter rather than follow her desire to take up paid employment had a major impact on the direction taken throughout the next few years of her life. In looking after her first-born grandchild, she was then put in a position of feeling unable to refuse her other daughters when they were in need of childcare. She felt she had to be seen to be fair:

*Doris:* It started with Jill when she had Hayley, she just stayed at home for the recognised period and she went straight back to work and I looked after Hayley ...and then there was Angela, that's Denise's, and Allan and Ronnie, that's Sally's ...and then we took them all on holiday with us – and we have taken them two at a time – well, there is eight grandchildren and they have all been at least once so that is like four trips isn't it? You have to do the same for them all don't you^?

Doris has in fact cared for all eight of her grandchildren for differing lengths of time and is now the primary carer for one of her grandsons.

In Doris's case all of her children and grandchildren live in close proximity to her therefore enabling her children to call upon her for help with childcare. The ages of her grandchildren are spread between older teenagers and primary school age children. Doris was forty-five when her first grandchild was born and was sixty-three at the time of interviewing, having been called upon to care for her grandchildren for eighteen years. She has been of good health throughout this time and therefore physically able to care for her grandchildren. However, how she felt about spending nearly twenty years of her life caring for her grandchildren, after spending over twenty years caring for her own children is difficult to say. The ambiguity of her answers in relation to this was something that emerged from the interview and is brought into later discussions.

My research findings confirm that the age at which a woman *becomes* a grandmother is therefore a factor influencing the experience and practice (Bengston, 1985; Burton, 1987) and it will affect the number of years she spends in this role, thus further affecting the potential for the relationship to develop and change over time. For younger, fitter grandmothers there is the possibility for a more active relationship with their grandchild, however, if they are engaged in full or part-time work, this situation leaves less time available for their grandchildren. My findings show that younger grandmothers with dependent children or those that are working have more demands on their time which has some effect on their relationship with both their grandchild and their own children. Older grandmothers generally experienced poorer health, but this did not significantly affect the quality of the relationship with their grandchildren. My research confirms previous research findings that the particular point in the life course at which a woman becomes a grandmother is a key factor in affecting the experience and practice (Thomas, 1986 a; Thompson et al., 1990).

## Numbers of children and grandchildren

The average number of children is 2.6 with four of the grandmothers having stepchildren. The average number of grandchildren worked out at 3.5 (see Appendix B). The numbers of grandchildren could affect how much, love, time, energy, material and practical help a grandmother give. The first grandchild could be at a distinct advantage. However, when asked how they felt about their different grandchildren, the consensus seemed to be that they loved all of them the same, but at times jealousies between grandchildren were reported:

*Connie:* I do love having the kids, I mean, I'm talking about Jack most of the time, but I have Carl round as well. Now that's another thing, Jack is very jealous, he was the first grandchild and then Carl came along and he's very jealous of him.

Int: How old's Carl?

*Connie:* Carl is two. Er... and yet we've taken him with us to (N) and we've stayed with Lyn and Neil and the two girls and he gets on fine with them. He shows off a bit, but he gets on fine, but Carl, he's just very jealous. (Connie, aged 56).

To admit to having favourites would perhaps not have been seen as being a 'good' grandmother. What appeared to be the most significant factor driving the level of contact between grandmother and grandchild was the needs and circumstances of the parent(s) of the grandchild.

A further interesting fact in light of the recognised increase in reconstituted families was that when asked to name their grandchildren, in the first instance, only one of the grandmothers (Connie) mentioned step-grandchildren. Later discussions revealed that Doris, Maureen and Irene all have step-grandchildren yet none of them mentioned this when they were asked to fill out the questionnaire. Connie, on the other hand, had included them in her list of grandchildren but not named them as step-grandchildren, indeed she did not appear to think of them as such. As I did not ask the grandmothers why they did not choose to include their step-grandchildren as part of their extended family, it is

difficult to know why this was the case. Perhaps they maintained a traditional view of 'the family' as only being made up of blood relatives despite their own experiences of changing family forms. Possibly it was because in Doris, Maureen and Irene's situations their step-grandchildren were children of their children's partners from previous marriages whereas, in Connie's case, her grandchildren were children of her step-children.

### **Geographical proximity to grandchildren**

Where the grandchildren lived in relation to the grandmother would seem an obvious factor in affecting the level of contact and the style of grandparenting. The majority of the grandmothers in this study live close to their children and grandchildren with two of the women, Gayle and Helen, living in the same street as their daughters. In four cases, Phyllis, Lorna, Maureen and Doris, the grandchildren actually live with their grandmothers. In most situations it was true that proximity affected the level of contact grandmothers had with their grandchildren but this was not a significant factor influencing the *quality* of their relationship with their grandchildren. Connie, Laura, Maureen, Dianne, Kate and Faith all spoke about being able to maintain satisfactory relationships with their grandchildren who lived some distance away. Laura and Connie had grandchildren living abroad, making contact on a physical level only possible perhaps once or twice a year. However, a determined and resourceful grandmother can even overcome this obstacle if she so wishes. For Laura the considerable distance of the Atlantic Ocean did not stop her being involved with her grandchildren's lives. Laura managed to master the latest Internet technology in order to connect herself with her grandchildren in America. She set up a video link so that she could constantly be involved in their lives. In speaking about how this video link was set up and how it works Laura said:

*Laura:* As soon as they said they were going to America I said

'well it's going to be awful'. So I saw about video links and I was thinking well maybe we could do this<sup>^</sup>. So we set up a link as soon as they went to America. Originally it was to keep in touch with my son so that we were part of his life. [...] Usually Sundays, because (H) is six hours behind us; it means that usually there's a phone call our time about two o'clock in the afternoon. That's when they've just got up and he says 'OK grandma, do you want a link?' And we can be on for an hour, an hour and a half.

For Laura the importance of her video link was that this enabled her grandson to get to know her even though they had thousands of miles between them. Laura described a meeting with him when they recently went to America:

*Laura:* We went over, and we arrived at the airport, and there was another grandparent who was obviously coming from somewhere - and hadn't seen his grandchild for a long time - and the grandfather ran and picked him up and the child went hysterical<sup>^</sup>, frightened<sup>^</sup>, didn't know who this strange man was<sup>^</sup>. Our little boy ran to us jumping up and down and screaming 'it's grandma and grandpa' and threw himself on us, and hugged us and kissed us and telling everybody who we were. So he knows us as if he sees us every day<sup>^</sup>.

Through her video link Laura was able to become involved in her grandson's life and 'see things as they actually happen'. This grandmother was present in a 'virtual' sense at her grandson's birthday party:

*Laura:* So they put the link up, and they put the computer screen next to the birthday table, and camera on and just left me there with the party. So they were all saying 'Hi grandma'<sup>^</sup> when the guests came and then they had the party. So I actually sang Happy Birthday and Jack showed me his presents and you know, blowing out the candles. So I was actually, 'virtually' at his birthday party. People find it strange, but it's now just part of our lives, it's quite normal<sup>^</sup>. (Laura, aged 60).

Distance can however create problems. Connie's daughter was living abroad when 'things were very rocky' in her daughter's marriage. This situation was made worse as her daughter was expecting her first child, causing Connie and her husband a great deal of heartache:



*Connie:* Erm, she was living out there and you know the marriage didn't work. I mean, he just walked out on her really... I went over for the birth and I was there for two weeks and when I came back I left her a letter saying that if she wanted to come home I would help her as much as I could. I told her that we would give her a credit card, that she could have the credit card number and if she had to get out in a hurry, because by this time she'd had the baby and he could have put a stop on her leaving the country with his child<sup>^</sup>. We didn't really think he would do that, but underneath there was that horrible fear that he could do it. Then I think things got very bad, the rent never got paid, and the landlord came round and wanted paying, so that's when she rang home and she just broke down in tears and said can she come home and Harry [Connie's husband] said yes. I went to bring her back. It was horrendous, we sold everything off ... to pay off the debts....And we brought the baby back sort of, under cover er...and we got back home. We got her a flat... but getting her into the system was very, very difficult. She had no money, she had nothing. She was genuinely without a penny in the world, really. (Connie, aged 56).

Connie's story shows the real heartache of a mother wanting to help and protect her daughter and her grandchild and the extra problems incurred when they live in another country. The fear of their daughter losing her child and their not being able to have access to their grandchild forced them to take very real risks to avoid this situation.

Jane does not appear to let the two hundred mile distance between her and two of her grandchildren cause a problem. Following her daughter's divorce, Jane took care of two of her grandchildren during the school holidays over a period of six years so that their mother could continue with her career development:

*Jane:* I had them, yes I did<sup>^</sup>, for six years ... that was so that Helen could carry on with her work. She needed to, you see, because she was on her own and she needed the money – her career too, for herself – she used the time at night to do her exams, well to study for her exams – [for a professional qualification]. (Jane, aged 82).

Jess also remains in contact with her daughter and her grandchildren through the telephone, almost on a daily basis, and does not feel that

she is deprived in anyway by not seeing them more often:

*Jess:* We get on fine the way we are...the boys tell me all sorts of things – I'm sure their mother doesn't know the half<sup>^</sup> of it – but then if there was anything worrying I would let her know. I would always be there if she needed me too (Jess, aged 76).

### **Intergenerational relations**

A further factor that could change the relationship was how the grandmother related to the parents of the grandchild. Laura, Diane, Doris, Phyllis and Maureen all mentioned times when their access to their grandchild was not what they would have liked it to be. Laura and Diane blamed Post-Natal Depression and the mother not wishing to be seen to be 'not coping' as the reason for having difficulty in seeing their grandchildren. On the other hand, the problems that Maureen, Doris and Phyllis encountered with their families resulted in these grandmothers taking a more involved role with their grandchildren than they wanted. For Phyllis, soon after the birth of her grandchild her daughter-in-law decided that she didn't want her baby and asked Phyllis to look after him - her daughter-in-law had mental health problems a condition that Phyllis believes may have been caused by her taking drugs. The situation that followed was so problematic that Phyllis went to court and eventually won legal custody of her grandson:

*Phyllis:* She came home after eleven days and she had him in the bedroom with her and she would feed him and get very angry with him – it started to look that we were going to be the ones that were looking after him, and I mean, I was, I knew that I had to sort of, distance myself, and I had a cleaning job four mornings a week and I didn't want to give that up – my daughter was at home studying ...and she was having to do everything for Gordon [the baby] and it just wasn't right – she [the mother] did nothing, not even clean his bottles – and I can see it now, it's so vivid she said 'Oh, can I have a word with you mum' and I said yes, 'Well what it is I don't like Gordon, I want you and dad to bring him up'. I said you can't do that, you'll feel differently when... she said 'No I don't want him, you'll have to have him'.

The mother left her child and her husband, leaving Phyllis very little

option other than take on the care of her grandchild from the age of four months. As she says, they went through 'two years of hell' until they had full legal custody:

*Phyllis*: It was difficult and very bad on my nerves and my sons too<sup>^</sup>, but we managed to sort things out. As I say he [her grandson] calls me mum – he is very settled and doesn't want to have contact with her [his mother]. Well we don't know where she is anyway. (Phyllis, aged 58).

It appears from the data that there are many factors which drive the extent of contact between grandmother and grandchild and influence the quality of their relationship. The most influential factor, however, appears to be the nature of the relationship between the grandmother and the child's parents. The importance of intergenerational relations therefore has emerged as the major factor in determining the 'doing' of grandmothing (see Chapter Five).

### **Social Class**

Family structure and family circumstances can have an effect on the possible relationship between a grandmother and her grandchild, and it might be reasonable to assume that social class might influence the relationship. As discussed in Chapter Three, any method of identifying or labeling women by class has its limitations<sup>28</sup>, however, using the method discussed in that chapter, out of my total sample of twenty, four could be described as working class, four as lower middle class, and twelve as middle class (see Appendix B). In respect of home ownership, eighteen of the women were homeowners with the remaining two living in council accommodation, with many having lived at their present address for over 20 years (see Appendix C). The highest level of education achieved by the majority of the women, thirteen out of the twenty, was secondary education, with the two oldest women, Jane and

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<sup>28</sup> As Stanworth argues, 'The conventional approach which relies on the occupation of the husband both obscures the extent to which the class experience of wives differs from that of husbands, and ignores the extent to which inequalities that divide women and men are themselves the outcome of the operation of the class system' (Stanworth, 1984:159).

Jess, leaving school at age fourteen and the rest at fifteen or sixteen. Four of the women received a Grammar School education; Betty and Kate went on to graduate from higher education while Lorna completed her studies at the further education level. However, when looking for differences in attitudes between women as a reflection of their class, no clear picture emerged. It could be argued that almost all of the women possess what has traditionally been seen as a 'middle class attitude' in respect of their aspirations for their children and grandchildren. They all saw a good education as being vital for the future success of their grandchildren, with many of them being actively involved in helping with homework or projects at school. Betty, who was middle-class, was closely involved with her grandchildren's schoolwork, as might be expected of a retired school teacher:

*Betty:* Well I try to help as much as I can with their homework, although at this moment in time they mostly do it on the computer and er...they wait for their mother to come home and she's now got a computer. And prior to that, when my husband was alive, he took them up and they were on the internet all the time. You know they were always... this Jeeves, or whatever it is.

Int: Ask Jeeves!

*Betty:* Yeh, but we're very involved. In fact the younger one at the moment I've just bought him a book – I just happened to see it in the paper shop the other day – It's on this Egyptian history<sup>^</sup> and so er, we were going through that the other week and I was telling them how my husband was in [...] for three years and he had lots of photos of the pyramids. And last summer actually we made a video. They're very much into Star Wars and that, so I made them all their cloaks and the laser things, and we went down to [.....] and the eldest made a play. (Betty, aged 69).

Phyllis, who could be described as working-class, appeared to possess much of the same middle-class values towards education. She was probably the most materially deprived of the women interviewed managing to take on the full time care of her grandson while living on social security payments plus her husband's disability allowance. She was very proud of the fact that she managed her finances well. What

was clear from the interview was that Phyllis had always taken full responsibility for this aspect of family life, something that reflects many traditional working class family practices. She had left school at fifteen and had not worked since the birth of her children. She was deeply involved with her grandson's education and had taken on the responsibility of broadening her own, and his, education through music, reading and current affairs. She was intensely proud of his school achievements. At one point in the interview Phyllis broke off to show me her grandson's latest school project. She was adamant that he would be the first member of their family to go to University:

*Phyllis:* He [her grandson] does really well, that's because he's interested^ and because we encourage him. We never had it [a good education] so we want it for him, and he knows that, and tries real hard. He'll go to University^... if I have anything to do with it he will^... cos that's what they need these days isn't it^?

Int: Yes it's important...

*Phyllis:* It has to be that or they just don't achieve^. (Phyllis, aged 58).

Phyllis' immense pride in the achievements of her grandson and the part that she played in enabling his success raised issues of grandmothers perhaps living their lives vicariously through the accomplishments of their grandchild; this is something that will be discussed further in Chapter Six.

Class as an indicator of differences in respect of attitudinal or behavioral variations within families has not proved to be very useful in this study. Most of the women mentioned giving financial help to their children and grandchildren at some point in their lives; however, occupation and income levels obviously influenced the extent of financial support that grandmothers were able to give. Several of the women paid for extra lessons outside school in music, dancing, swimming, tennis, football and drama. Others had bought computers or had started insurance policies in order to help provide for their

grandchildren's anticipated University education. They all identified with ideas of delayed gratification, in the sense of working hard at school, or training for a profession, or trade, in order to gain the perceived rewards of a more secure and improved material standard of living. What was interesting was that all of the women said that the most valuable asset they were able to give to their grandchildren was their time. Time as a gift and a resource has emerged as a major factor in the grandmother/grandchild relationship (see Chapters Five and Six).

### **Health, generation and caring work**

All of the women in the study are mobile, however, the quality of their health is varied. Angela was recovering from cancer when she was interviewed and had carried on caring for her two children throughout her treatment. What was remarkable about Angela's story was that, contrary to thinking of caring for her grandchildren as a problem or a burden during her illness, she saw it as a benefit. She was convinced that having an important role to play as their grandmother and child minder gave her added strength and the will to recover. Although she stressed that her cancer is 'still there but under control' she was sure that her continued involvement with her grandchildren was an important factor in her recuperation. Angela recalled:

*Angela:* There was a bit of a blip last year but er, cos I got cancer. Yeh, got over that, and er even through having chemotherapy, I had chemotherapy every three weeks, six times, and I sailed through it and still looked after the kids as well. They kept me going... (long pause) so yes, we had a bit of a blip, but we got over it. (Laughs). (Angela, aged 52).

Betty suffers from a debilitating chronic illness and finds the limitations that this imposes on her life very difficult to come to terms with. She had been a very active woman during most of her life as a dancer, acrobat and as a teacher. Betty remembered the time she collapsed when teaching a keep fit class:

*Betty:* Talk about embarrassing<sup>^</sup>. It's a good job I wasn't doing the young<sup>^</sup> class, this was the over fifties class. (laughs) and er, I

was taken into hospital for well over three weeks, it was ghastly>. But once the health's gone you've practically had it. That was the problem. As I said to lots of people, I think I could have coped with Joe going a lot easier, [her husband had recently died] not easier, better, if my health hadn't cracked up. You know, it seems to have all... (long pause).

Int: Happened at once^.

*Betty*: Yes>. (Betty, aged 69).

The eldest of the group, Jane, although mentally very alert, and fiercely independent, was finding that she was slowing down considerably and had much less energy than she had in her seventies. She found that recently she was spending much more time visiting her G.P. and felt that she was becoming something of a 'nuisance'. Jane spoke about having to resign herself to the fact that this was part of getting older and knew she might eventually need to request help from her daughters. When asked how she felt about this, she said:

*Jane*: I know I have done a lot for them in the past, but I just don't want to become a nuisance. They have their lives to live, you know, they are all very busy, they are good to me, and I know I can call on them anytime, for DIY and things, the garden and that, but I like to do my own^ things around the house, and I know they see things that I don't, but I don't want them to feel that they have to worry about me, I sometimes get quite frustrated when I can't do things you know, like change a light bulb, cos they say 'don't you dare get up on a chair and do that mum' and I don't now cos I know it's dangerous. (Jane, aged 82).

Maureen, Lorna and Gayle all suffered from stress related illnesses as a direct result of caring for two or three generations of their families. As Philips (2000) has recognised, these women as the 'sandwich generation' take on board a 'second wave of nurturing' (Brody, 1990), and Government figures show that 41% of carers are predominantly women within the 45 – 50 age range (Department of Health, 1999). Many of my participants' stories add weight to these findings. As one example, Gayle was caring for her father and mother-in-law, her own children and her grandchild at the same point in time:

*Gayle*: Yeh, my father-in-law we looked after him, my mother-in-

law had just died of cancer and Kate (her daughter) was expecting and I was kind of... thought I was coping, but your inner self isn't... And granddad wasn't coping with living, well he was in a way, but then he got ill, and I wasn't sure how I was going to cope with that. I wanted^ to [look after him] because they bring us in the world and we should do all we can to help^.

Int: So how many years were you actually caring for either, a parent or parent-in-law, and caring for your grandchild and your daughter at the same time?

Gayle: I suppose it was [...] when my mother-in-law died - before Leigh was born - and there was granddad and mum - I suppose eight years.

Int: So looking back how do you think you coped, what kept you going through that time?

Gayle: My husband. I don't know... family as well, and my doctor. He was brilliant, he was the one that said to me 'How's Kath, how's the baby, how's your father in law, how's your husband?' and then he'd say 'How are you?' So he said just make a day for yourself, which is why we took the Sunday out. [...] Then I got through that, but I was having them from all sides, but I'm fine. I've come out of it and I'm fine>.

Int: Would you say your own health suffered during that time?

Gayle: Yes it did, it did for about three years and when I gave up the job I had [she worked part-time in retailing] it was a case of if I didn't then it would give me^ up, so it was a case of, just change my life. I don't worry as much now and I take each day as it comes and if things get on top then I have to say no, I need a break. But, yeh^, I think I did have to stand back and take a look at my life. (Gayle, aged 53).

For Gayle this intensive period of caring for her family took its toll on her health and therefore she found she had to take stock of her life and make some time for herself. When talking about caring for her father-in-law there was a definite sense of her doing this out of duty or family obligation. The word 'should' is significant in the sentence 'they bring us



into the world and we *should* do all we can to help', however she began the sentence by saying 'I wanted to' which would seem to indicate that she carried out this caring work through choice. Later in the paragraph she says 'it just seemed natural to us'; this could reveal that Gayle understands caring for family members as part of family practice or she could be referring to the idea of caring as 'naturally' being women's work. Although she uses the word 'us' in fact it was Gayle who was doing the majority of the caring work. This situation is something she seemed to take for granted as 'normal' within families. As this passage shows, in order for Gayle to take time for herself she needed the 'permission' of her doctor to take her own needs into consideration and as she says learn to say no. Perhaps it was the opinion of her Doctor as a male authority figure that had to be taken seriously, that allowed Gayle the opportunity to give herself leave to think about herself without feelings of guilt. Issues surrounding women's perceived 'natural' capacity to care will be taken up in Chapter Six.

Maureen also found that her health suffered - her husband joined in the interview at one point to make it clear that she had suffered with her 'nerves' from taking on the primary responsibility for their grandson, also commenting that the experience had been 'stressful' for both of them. Maureen recalled:

*Maureen:* I mean I have done everything for him – I mean he is very immature for his age – I mean, he is nearly nineteen, but in lots of ways he isn't. He is hopeless at managing money – I mean, I have to do things for him all the time and tell him all the time and be at him because he doesn't know the value of money at all you know – because the last time we had this upset you see [she is referring here to her grandson stealing money from her] – for the first time it really upset me, it were making me poorly and he [grandchild's father] said 'right your gran's poorly, you can't get her into this state anymore'. (Maureen, aged 65).

At the time of interviewing Maureen was sixty-five, as was her husband. For a couple just coming into retirement the problems they faced with a 'difficult' teenager put pressure on them in many ways. They had not asked for financial help from outside agencies nor for professional help with their grandson's anti-social behaviour. They appeared to get some financial help from their son but no help of any kind from the mother.

It is interesting to note that both Maureen and Gayle gave up their part-time work rather than their work of caring for the family. The needs of their families appear to be the priority for both these women. Although they had both stated that they enjoyed their work and the company of other women, when their health began to suffer, it was their work outside the home they felt most able to sacrifice. Why this is the case is a question that will be expanded on later in Chapters Five and Six.

The health of the mother of the grandchild can also have an affect on the grandmother/grandchild relationship. In two cases the mothers suffered from what was diagnosed by the grandmothers as Post-Natal Depression. In both these situations the grandmothers' anxiety about their daughters and the possible effects on their grandchildren appeared to be contributing factors in their increased involvement with their grandchildren;

*Emma:* Julie was quite depressed as well at the time, probably very anxious a well. She kind of felt quite unreal<sup>^</sup> about the whole situation so, instead of taking over completely, I just kind of, had to encourage<sup>^</sup> Julie to kind of bond with the baby. She would have given up quite easily for me to take over.

Int: Do you think so?

*Emma:* Yes, Yeh<sup>^</sup>. I mean er, in hindsight she really *did* have quite a bad Post-Natal Depression and it wasn't until about a year afterwards, only recently, that she's been diagnosed as having Postnatal Depression. So, she's had it quite difficult er...and it's been quite difficult for her to bond with Kyle really. (Emma, aged 42).

Lorna also speaks about her daughter's depression following the birth of her child and the departure of the father of her child:

*Lorna:* Well I mean I was sorry for Jenny>, because I think, up until her having the baby, as a couple they were getting on well... and they seemed to have similar interests and that I think she realised then that she was the one left holding the baby.

Int: Yeah.

*Lorna:* And she was quite>, she was going through, I think, I mean, I feel that she was suffering quite a lot from Post-Natal Depression, she was having quite a bad time.

Int. Umm

*Lorna:* And er, she was quite emotional – she upset *really* easily if something wasn't quite right – she would be upset> and I think that was quite a hard time really, because as I said before, you want the best, you want everything to go right and be right for your family.

Int: Yeah.

*Lorna:* And when things aren't right you get upset yourself and I think it was quite hard work for all of us....(Lorna, aged 47).

What is interesting from both of these accounts is the way in which both grandmothers have pathologised the response of their teenage daughters to becoming mothers. It is a taken that their depression has been caused by an abnormal hormonal reaction at the birth of the child. The social aspects of such a response, such as the realisation that as females they have been 'left holding the baby', and the loss of their freedom, and possible limitations being placed on their future choices, although recognised, were not seen as enough of a reason for the young women to become depressed. A medical label gave their behaviour more credence. It is significant that Laura and Diane identified the mothers of their grandchildren suffering from Post-Natal Depression as reasons for their being excluded from their grandchildren. Post-Natal Depression appears to be acknowledged as a label to attach to any perceived 'abnormal' maternal behaviour. The importance of the dominant discourses surrounding mothering and their

effects on the experience of mothering and grandmothering are discussed in detail in Chapter Six.

The health of the grandchild could also affect the kind of relationship a grandmother has with her grandchild. However, in only one case was the physical health of a grandchild reported as having any significance. One of Jane's granddaughters was born prematurely and had Cerebral Palsy. At the time of the birth Jane had been closely involved with caring for the older sibling while her mother was in hospital. The difficulties arising out of a family adjusting to caring for a severely disabled child meant that Jane became significantly more involved with caring for the older grandchild.

*Jane:* I looked after Libby most of the time, for nearly three whole months. They [the parents] were at the hospital so much of the time – and they had a lot to get used to<sup>^</sup>. It was a very difficult time – they didn't know if Jill was going to die too<sup>^</sup> [Jill had been one of twins – the other had died at birth]. Jill is lovely, but I didn't know how to lift and handle her the right way<sup>></sup> so I didn't have as much to do with her as with Libby. Me and Libby are still very close. (Jane, aged 82).

Although my study has only found evidence of a single case, it is clear that the physical or mental health of a grandchild has the potential to significantly affect the experience of grandparenting.

### **Working life: Patterns of employment**

The occupational status of the women, both at the present time, and in the past, are influencing factors in the practice of being a grandmother. As well as the considerable job of caring for their children and grandchildren, the majority of the women (13) are in some form of paid employment outside the home, four of the women work full-time, seven part-time, six are retired, although two of these women are still in part-time employment, and three of the women described themselves as full-time housewives (see Table 6).

**Table 6 Employment Details**

<b>Working full time</b>	<b>Working part time</b>	<b>Retired</b>	<b>Full time housewife</b>
4	7	6 (2 of whom have part-time jobs)	3

However, as feminist research has shown, the term housewife hides within it a myriad of often unrecognised and unpaid tasks and responsibilities (Oakley, 1974; Oakley, 1976). Angela described herself as 'just a housewife', not having worked outside the home since the birth of her first child. However, in talking to her, what emerged was a very different story. In her lifetime she had fostered thirty-six children. Angela recalled her career as a foster parent:

*Angela:* Mainly babies and toddlers, one or two were older. I think we had a nine year old at one point, but er, and obviously because of them coming into care, they needed lots of love and attention etc. Some of them were in a very sorry state>. And we've actually fostered babies that have gone to adopted parents so, its very rewarding, very rewarding work, but err, heartbreaking at the same time. So yes^, our life has revolved around children. I've loved every minute of it.

Angela's caring work is carried out on many levels: as well as caring for and about her immediate family, she had recently adopted a child with learning difficulties, she looks after her two grandchildren on average three full days per week, until his recent death, she also cared for her father who lived in the same street, she is the Secretary of a local Swimming Club and a member of the committee for Mencap as well as an active member of her local church. What emerges from her story is that she does an immeasurable amount of mostly unpaid care work for both her family and her local community (Bagipole, 1996).

Out of the six women who are now retired, four were working full-time until their retirement, one worked part-time and one was a full-time housewife. Although they describe themselves as retired, two of the women are, in fact, still in part-time employment as well as working taking care of their grandchildren. At the time of interviewing four of the women were in full-time occupations, one as an administrator, one as a clerical officer, and one as a self-employed shopkeeper. Lorna and Kate found that fitting the demands of their full-time jobs with being grandmothers and mothers to teenage mothers who were continuing training, one as a nurse and one taking a Degree Course, were, at times, extremely difficult. As Kate recalls:

*Kate:* When she started to work on the wards, what it was, the early morning preceded by late night so, pick Hannah up from nursery, hold on to her and then Susan would come and stay the night and go off to work early in the morning and I would get Hannah up and take her to nursery. So that is how we did it^.

Int: And you were working full-time at this time?

*Kate:* Yes, I must have been, yes.

Int: So how did you manage to fit it all in?

*Kate:* Well, I suppose it's just like any mother would do I suppose, and I mean I didn't have to do it very often^, you know, like I mean, at the most twice a week that would have happened. Yes^, so although I have always helped a lot^, well certainly helped continuously>, it hasn't always been a lot in a week.

Int: Was there ever a point when you felt that you were being asked to do too much?

*Kate:* Well only last week (laughs).

Int: Why was that?

*Kate:* At last Susan is now qualified and obviously as you were training the hours weren't as long, and it is a most un-child friendly profession [nursing], considering it is a female dominated profession, it is absolutely ludicrous that they can't sort things out better for women with children, but anyway, be that as it may, uhmm, she, in order for her to get a permanent job she had to shift wards, and she is now on one where the shift system is even more un-child friendly, and one time last week, uhmm, basically between sort of, seven o'clock in the morning Hannah was dropped off with me, at eight thirty Susan returned from work, she only works down the road, uhmm and took Hannah to school^, and I came here to a student who was in a certain amount of distress, we [Kate and the student] then uhmm at

eleven thirty had to go and pick Hannah up from Nursery School<sup>^</sup> where she now is, at twelve thirty, Susan's new partner came and took over from me, when Susan finally<sup>^</sup> arrived at one thirty, and it just seemed to be totally ridiculous<sup>^</sup> for one small child, and you know, just to enable Susan to be at work for a morning, so at that point, I must<sup>^</sup> admit that I did think, you know, something is going to have to give here, we cannot<sup>^</sup> go on in this ludicrous way. (Kate, aged 55).

Kate's work has always been a very important aspect of her life. She is fully committed to her job but, at the same time, she is fully committed to being a mother and a grandmother. Fitting the demands of two often, opposing elements of her life into a working day proved to be very difficult and, often, in her own words, appeared 'ludicrous'. The difficulties faced by mothers finding childcare facilities that fit with their working hours is something that arose in many of the women's stories. The result of this 'fiasco', as Kate described it, was that her daughter decided that she could only realistically manage to work part-time. As Kate was also well aware, this could have an effect on her daughter's career prospects as part-time workers are less likely to gain promotion than full-time workers (Crompton and Harris, 1998).

Faith manages her shop full-time with her husband. She also looks after two of her grandchildren aged one and four while she runs the shop. Faith fits her own work around her grandchildren, also managing to cook for herself, her husband and her children. She has constructed a playpen at the rear of the shop so that her grandchildren can be safe whenever she is called to serve customers. Faith is prepared to do this despite the fact that the father of her grandchildren also runs a shop. It would appear that he does not feel that he can manage to do both jobs at once. When asked about why this was the case Faith said:

*Faith:* Well as a woman, a mother and that, you get used to managing all things together, you just do it cos it has to be done, whereas men they can only do one thing at a time can't they<sup>^</sup> [both laugh]. (Faith, aged 53).

There was a general common-sense understanding amongst many of the participants that men could not be expected to manage childcare and other kinds of work together. Although this situation could be interpreted as oppressive, Faith took pride in her abilities to manage her life in this way. As Faith said, men were 'inadequate' in this sense and were just 'not up to the job'.

In common with the employment patterns of women generally and the division of labour within the home, nine of the women were in part-time employment, mostly in clerical, nursing, teaching or retail positions and all of the women took responsibility for the majority of housework and emotional labour within their family situations (DeGraff and Anker, 1999). The importance of work outside the home was related by several of the women. Although Susan was officially past retirement age, she preferred to carry on her part time job as an accounts clerk. For Susan, her work gave her time for herself away from home, some financial independence and contact with colleagues:

*Susan:* I enjoy<sup>^</sup> my work. It gets me out of the house and into town. I get to see my friends and keep in touch with what's going on, and so I get invited to things – it gives me some private spending money – he [husband] doesn't know what I spend it on – he wouldn't ask - and no, I wouldn't be without it. (Susan, aged 65).

While Maureen and Phyllis gave up work outside the home to care for their grandsons, others did not. Gayle said about her work:

*Gayle:* I certainly, at the time she had James I had a job and I was not going to give that job up purely to look after James<sup>^</sup>. I would do my bit, but not to give up the job because I think you need your space as well. (Gayle, aged 54).

Irene said that she would not stop work because:

*Irene:* I enjoy my work and I enjoy what I do and I enjoy the extra money cos it helps me spend it on the kids! (Laughs).

Int: Why not on yourself?



*Irene*: No don't get me wrong, we get good holidays, we go away. We've been to [...] and [...] and last year we went to [....]. So yeh, we work hard and I suppose we play hard really. But we sort of link it all in together. I mean you do what you can for your own, if you can, but we certainly don't go without<sup>^</sup>. (*Irene*, aged 53).

Women's 'orientations to work' is something that has been debated and contested. Hakim (1991) has argued that there are two 'qualitatively different' types of working women, the 'committed' and the 'uncommitted'. 'Committed' women work full-time and 'uncommitted' women work part-time with the former giving priority to their working careers and the latter to their domestic life. However, as Crompton and Harris (1998) have argued 'women's employment behaviour is a reflection of the way in which women actively construct their work-life biographies in terms of historically available opportunities and constraints' (1998:119). Women make choices regarding employment but, these are limited by economic, geographical, social, personal and family circumstances as well as social expectations about what women can and should do. As social life is constantly changing the choices available to particular cohorts may also influence educational opportunities and therefore, working lives. As Walby argues: 'Even if women appear to face the same opportunity structure now, their realistic range of options is different, depending upon their earlier decisions which set a trajectory which is very hard to change' (1997:11). Older women will have made life decisions under different gendered relations where, the private, more domestic world, was more associated with women's lives rather than the more public system of today. 'They will have different values and moralities, different political agendas and priorities' (1997:11).

For many of the women in this study, the earlier choices they were able to make limited their *realistic* options for work in later life. As the majority of the women (16) had given up work for a period of time to bring up their own children, their chances for advancing a career or

making a career change were extremely difficult. When returning to work, the majority of the women went back into jobs at a similar or lower level to those they held before they had children. However, the working lives of younger women will not necessarily follow the same patterns. Younger women may decide on a balance of commitment to education and employment on the one hand, and caring for the family on the other, but under quite different patterns of gendered opportunities than women of previous cohorts. Increasing numbers of younger married women with dependent children are choosing to combine work and childcare throughout the life course (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, 1995).

Age and generation are important then not only in representing different stages of the life cycle, but because people of different ages embody different systems of patriarchy, different gender regimes. Their life trajectories are structured by the different systems. They bring to the present traces of different pasts. It is these different histories, not merely different ages, which are of interest here (Walby, 1997:12).

One of the significant 'traces of the past' that my participants bring with them is the fact that they have invested heavily in their children. This 'past' means that when seeing their children faced with the often unsatisfactory facilities for childcare, which could affect their advancement and prosperity, these women often chose once again to give up, or restrict, their working lives. Some of the women would have preferred to remain in employment but they found the kinds of alternative care available for their families unacceptable. More affluent and educated women would perhaps have been able to 'buy in' the right kind of help, but for most of the women interviewed this was not an option. They felt that they had no alternative but to take on the work of family care themselves. The concern here is that older women are being disadvantaged once again, in this case by younger women taking up the new gendered opportunities open to them. The increasing

polarization of the experiences of older and younger women's working lives is something that Walby (1997) has taken up and, as Beck-Gernsheim argues (2002), changes in the ways in which relationships are now understood also impact on the everyday experience of older women. These are themes to which I will return, as it is understanding how older women negotiate these difficult and often opposing aspects of their lives that is central to this study.

### **Leisure and social activities**

The concept of leisure and 'free time' is highly problematic when applied to women's lives (Chambers, 1986). As Chambers found, women's 'leisure is embedded in domestic duties' therefore, their 'lives are structured principally by domestic time which fundamentally supports the institutional and leisure time-tables of men' (1986:321-322) and, I would add, the time-tables of children. Most of the women had very little free time available for leisure activities and, in some cases, their limited free time was soon taken up by their families. Although all of the women expressed interest in things outside the family, ranging from amateur dramatics to grass-track racing, it was 'the family', which in most cases seemed to mean 'children', that was their main interest. My participants' stories appear to confirm the notion that we now live in a 'child-centred' society, which means that the needs of children are often placed above the needs of the men within a familial situation. Free time was precious and was something that had to be protected: clear guidelines were set out by some grandmothers to avoid a situation where all their time was utilised by others:

*Connie:* I just have to be careful. Saturday night she said 'are you going out mum?' and I said 'well I don't know, we might be, we don't always decide, we could decide Saturday morning, we have nothing holding us back', so I said 'why' and I know what's coming... 'can you babysit' and if she gets round me and I say yes, then it will sometimes cause a row with Jack and me cos he wanted to go out and he'll say she is taking advantage. (Connie, aged 56).

Irene also spoke about the difficulties that being asked to give up her own time meant to her:

*Irene:* I won't babysit during the week unless it's something for school. I won't babysit for her to go out. I mean I need my<sup>^</sup> time. She has just split up with her current boyfriend, which does make it a little bit more difficult. But she accepts that I won't do anything of an evening. (Irene, aged 53).

For the majority of the women, socialising with friends and family, often around a shared interest, seemed to be the most favoured form of relaxation. Most had a home-based craft interest such as music, reading, sewing or knitting, which they used as a form of relaxation in-between household tasks. These kinds of activities are useful as they can be taken up and put down at any time and therefore fit around housework and caring for the family (Chambers, 1986). Several women went to craft classes such as egg gilding, water-colour painting, weaving and dress making. Jane, the eldest, had many home-based interests, reading, sewing, knitting and genealogy. She had developed her dress-making skills, going to night classes and gaining her City and Guilds qualifications, not only for pleasure but also so that she could use them professionally to earn extra money for the family. Through her church she had become interested in family history. Although Jane was eighty-two she regularly walked to the local library and local parish church to carry out her genealogical research. In her home she showed me several projects she was working on: knitting for her church's Relief Society, sewing for friends and family and tracing 'family trees'. Doris, Betty and Mary were very similar. Doris's house was full of projects: sewing costumes for her grandchildren who were involved in drama and dance, knitting for one of her grandchildren and making curtains for one of her daughters. Her skills, and therefore, much of her leisure time, were utilised by the whole family:

*Doris:* I have always knit, sew, mend, iron, anything domestic I've plunged in at various times, because they have got behind or you know, it's been a nice day and they have taken the kids out instead – and that with all three of them. One would come down and say 'have you got this?' or 'have you got that?' and you were

expected to have it as well – and still do! I'm still expected to have it – Steve often says 'it's funny how you always have got the right bit of thing' I have a box that I put things in and I think 'Oh well that might come in when they are doing something'. (Doris, aged 63).

Doris also used her domestic skills to earn extra money. Through her earlier work as a housemaid, Doris had learned many what are now probably considered to be 'crafts', or tricks of the trade, for example, how to clean silver or how to remove stains with natural ingredients such as rhubarb and vinegar; knowledge that she appeared to take great pride in. She utilised these skills in her part-time cleaning jobs in local professional people's houses where she felt she had become, in many cases, a trusted and valuable friend as well as an employee.

Two of the women, Gayle and Irene, are involved with the Girl Guiding Organisation. For both of these women this is a commitment that takes up a great deal of their time and energy. Irene, Betty and Angela are all involved with organising local sports and recreational clubs. These women appeared to have a very strong sense of community. The amount of voluntary work carried out by the women in this study was remarkable, particularly when the amount of caring work they performed for their families was also taken into consideration. The idea of being a part of the community and of giving something back featured in many of the women's stories. Mary helped at her local playschool and Sunday School and become a kind of surrogate granny to many of the children there. The feeling of being loved in return for the love and attention she gave was very important to her:

*Mary:* I mean there's one little boy that goes, I haven't seen him for a while, but I was there the other week because somebody was off and oh his face, it just beamed when he saw me. He ran to me and he calls me granny Mary. He always calls me granny Mary.

*Int:* How many children are you a granny to then?

*Mary:* Oh a lot. (laughs) A lot. (Mary, aged 61).

This is not to say that the women did not take part in leisure activities for their own personal gratification. Amateur dramatics and light opera featured as major interests in Maureen, Laura and Susan's lives. Maureen stated that when she was rehearsing for the latest production this took precedence and that everything else went on hold. Gill loved the excitement of taking part in grass-track racing and Helen took holidays abroad and enjoyed travelling and 'being able to please herself'. Being involved in these various activities was clearly a major part of their identity and how they saw themselves.

It would appear that religion plays an important part in the lives of almost half of the women. Gayle, Angela, Kate, Jane, Phyllis, Jess and Mary all regularly attend church and take an active part in the running of the events that take place there. For some the church is a means of remaining connected to the local community. Mary, Phyllis and Angela are active in the playschool attached to their church and Mary is also a Sunday School teacher. Fundraising for the church and other charitable organisations also featured in many of the women's stories.

## **Summary**

What then does this initial information say about the grandmothers in this study? The general characteristics of the grandmothers outlined in this chapter show that they are a diverse group with each grandmother having to adapt to a number of factors that variously impact upon the practice of grandmothering. Demographic factors and biographical differences including marital status, age, cohort, the timing of becoming a grandmother, numbers of grandchildren and children, proximity to grandchildren, social class and questions of health have emerged as significant factors. Social change, in particular divorce and generational differences in attitudes to relationships and women's working practices, have begun to emerge as important factors that will be expanded on in Chapter Five.

Central to the findings of this chapter is the need to recognise the variety of work that grandmothers do, whether it be full or part-time paid work, unpaid work such as community voluntary work, leisure activities, familial work such as caring for elderly parents and grandchildren and housework. Acknowledging the vital caring work that grandmothers provide for their community and their families is necessary to any understanding of who grandmothers are and what they do.

My findings show that the participants share the belief that the family unit and marriage are valued institutions and report the relationship with their families and their grandchildren as the most important aspect of their lives. The experience of the grandmothers in this study questions the idea that the extended family no longer plays a significant part in peoples lives. The grandmothers appear to place their families at the centre of their lives, confirming other research that argues for a rethinking of sociological theorising that has suggested the lessening of kinship ties (Williams, 2004). The grandmothers in this study show a great deal of commitment to their families through providing care for family members, in particular for their grandchildren, which takes up a large amount of their time and energy.

My findings show that their lives are very full, displacing the myth that grandmothers are old, dependent and disengaged from society. Many are what could be termed middle-aged and remain in employment and yet still manage to fit caring for their grandchildren into their very busy lives. There does, however, appear to be a normative age at which the majority of the women became grandmothers (see Appendix B). Whether there is a commonly understood 'ideal' of what a grandmother might be and how this matches up with the 'reality' of what the grandmothers do is taken up in the following chapter.

# Chapter 5

## Doing Grandmothering:

### The Impact of Family Circumstances on Everyday Practice

As Chapter Four has made clear, grandmothers are not an homogeneous group; the experience of being a grandmother is neither a universal experience nor does it occur in isolation from other aspects of social life. The complexity and diversity of factors that impact on what grandmothers *do* are dependent on influences from both macro and micro levels of society. It is the ways in which these different aspects of their lives intersect and shape what they *do* for their families that is the focus of this chapter. I will demonstrate that what grandmothers *do* is dependant on a combination of social, familial and demographic factors, underpinned by each grandmother's cultural understandings of their role, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Six. What grandmothers *do* is dependent not only on their particular personal history, but also on their past and present kin relationships. In order to locate grandmothering within its social milieu, I begin this chapter by exploring what this particular group of women reported as their 'ideal' model of grandmothering. This 'ideal' model will be used as a template against which to place the actuality of their experiences as grandmothers.

#### **A model of an 'ideal' grandmother**

Although the women in my study are a diverse group, there does seem to be a some common understanding of who an 'ideal' grandmother is and what an 'ideal' grandmother does, against which they evaluate their own experiences. In many cases they referred to either 'a proper grandmother' or described some kind of 'ideal' qualities, circumstances or experiences of being a grandmother. As a group they appear to share some common ideas about what an ideal grandmother/grandchild relationship might be like, and how an ideal grandmother might behave.



**Table 7: A Model of an Ideal Grandmother/Grandchild Relationship**

<b>Ideal Circumstances</b>	<b>Ideal Qualities</b>	<b>Ideal Experience</b>
Ideal age between Fifty and Sixty (15)	Be there for the grandchild (17) Have time for them (20)	Receiving Love (20)
Lives in separate household from own child and grandchild (10)	Has more patience (20) Teacher of values (10) Wise woman (10)	Feeling needed (10)
Parents of child mature enough and in settled relationship (18)	Able to indulge and spoil the child (19)  Comfort figure (17)	Feel younger (10)
Has enough time to enjoy grandchild (17)	Keeper of family photos and family history and provides continuity (12)	Feeling part of family life (11)
Good relations between grandparents and own children (20)	Not to have full responsibility for the child; can hand child back at the end of the day (18)	Seeing the continued success of family (16)
Live close enough for easy access (10)	Non- interference with parents ideas of bringing up child <sup>29</sup> (13)	Closeness (15)

[NB. The numbers in brackets represent the number of women who reported the ideals quoted. I have only used ideals mentioned by at least 50% of the women].

Table 7 above provides a model of an ideal grandmother/grandchild relationship as an analytical tool to compare the 'ideal' with the reality of each woman's individual situation. The ideal circumstances were extracted from my participants' responses in the context of their own, and others', family situations. The second column of Table 7 lists the

<sup>29</sup> The exception to this rule is when the grandchild is perceived to be at risk.

qualities that were taken from the interview data as being representative of what this particular group of women reported to be ideal grandmother/grandchild relations. The third column identifies what the respondents described as the ideal experience, that is, what they hoped to gain from being a grandmother.

The women drew on three different but related models of grandmothers; a) a mixture of past relationships with their own mothers and grandmothers, b) a 'wished for' relationship not having known their own grandmother, or c) cultural representations of 'ideal' types. Their responses seem to run parallel to the findings of much previous academic research on what grandmothers do<sup>30</sup>, this might suggest that these qualities have permeated into society at many levels and are culturally associated with what grandmothers do. Connie described her 'ideal' grandmother based on her memories of her mother-in-law:

*Connie:* She was what I call a proper nana you know, where she was a big lady with a big bosom and they'd just sit on her knee all lay their heads down and fall asleep. And that was it you know. They felt cosy and safe and she was just a typical grandma as far as I was concerned. She was so fair with punishments and everything, with what she had to say, she was such a wise person, she was lovely, really^ she was lovely, and like, I spent all my time with her really. Me and her and the children together. So, yes^, she did play a big part in the children's lives.

*Int:* What was it like, sort of adjusting to the children [Connie took on three step-children] did she help you and the children to adjust?

*Connie:* Oh definitely, definitely. Yes, she was er... she disciplined them in a way that... I don't know, she did everything the right way, she was a wise old lady you know.

*Int:* Do you think that's part of being a grandma, being a wise old lady?

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<sup>30</sup> There are several studies that explore what grandmothers do but I consider the following studies as representative in covering this area of research (Neugarten and Weinstein, 1964; Fischer, 1983; Johnson, 1983; Hagestad, 1985; King and Elder, 1997)

*Connie:* [both laugh], Well, I wish I could be like that, I mean I don't think I am, but I wish I could be, I'm not as wise as she was. (Connie, aged 56).

Gill described her idea of an ideal grandma as follows:

*Gill:* My ideal grandma is an older woman. I think they are lovely to their grandchildren. [...] I don't know. I think it's just my idea of the little granny, there sat knitting and baking the biscuits [laughs], but no, I think all grandmas are special. I think everybody does their best for their grandchildren. I think they try to do more for the grandchildren than what they did for their children. But they try to do more for the grandchildren because they couldn't do it for their children....I think we have more patience with them as grandparents. And you can give them that little extra love. Whereas the parents, although they do give them love, they are busy doing things. Whereas I've got a lot of time so I really do appreciate it when they come and I'm dying to have them over, just for the company and things like that. I do enjoy their company. (Gill, aged 51).

These women's stories reveal an 'ideal' that they aspire to. This 'ideal' is based on a mixture of past experience and cultural representations of 'traditional' grandmothers that could be said to be mythical or at least atypical (Kitzinger, 1997). For the majority of the grandmothers in this study the reality of the situation did not always match up to this 'ideal'.

As can be seen from the demographic and biographical details of the women provided in Chapter Four, there are many factors that might potentially influence the level and type of access that grandmothers have with their grandchildren. The needs of the middle generation affect the contact grandmothers have with their grandchildren, the number of hours they are called upon to care for them and what they might be expected to do with them. Ultimately it is this relationship that has the potential to be a significant influence on the level of satisfaction grandmothers gain from the relationship.

**Table 8: Family Circumstances Affecting the Grandmother/Grandchild Relationship**

Pseudonym	Family Circumstances*					
	Full-time surrogate mother	Mother works	Divorced parents	Teenage mother	Parental' lifestyle	'Proper' grand-mother
Angela		√				√
Betty		√	√			√
Connie		√	√			√
Diane						√
Emma				√	√	
Faith		√				√
Gayle		√	√	√		
Helen		√				√
Jess			√			√
Mary		√	√			√
Phyllis	√		√		√	√
Irene		√	√	√		
Jane		√	√			√
Kate		√		√	√	√
Lorna		√		√		
Maureen	√		√			√
Susan		√				√
Laura						√
Gill		√				√
Doris	√		√		√	√
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>16</b>

\*Circumstances may overlap in some cases.

I have identified six sets of family circumstances which influence the relationship between grandmother and grandchild (see Table 8). In some cases these circumstances overlap but they are all influential in deciding the level of involvement which the women had with their

grandchildren and, to some extent, the way they experienced the relationship. Sixteen of the twenty drew on their understanding of what an 'ideal' grandmother could be expected to do (see also Table 7). Grandmothers who have more than one grandchild may experience the relationship with one as 'ideal' but not with another. For those cases I have ticked all their reported experiences. All of them reported that they experienced pleasure and satisfaction from their relationship with their grandchildren even if the family circumstances were not what they would have hoped for.

**Table 9 Time spent Caring for Grandchildren**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Number of hours per week</b>	<b>Paid for care</b>
Angela	25	√
Betty	10 plus school holidays	
Connie	16-20	
Diane	Babysitting	
Emma	Resident grandchild	
Faith	25	√
Gayle	20-25	
Helen	30	√
Jess	0	
Mary	12	
Phyllis	Primary carer for resident grandchild	√F*
Irene	12-15	
Jane	Cares in school holidays	
Kate	12-20	
Lorna	Resident grandchild	
Maureen	Primary carer for resident grandchild	√F*
Susan	12-16	
Laura	Holiday visits only	
Gill	4-8	
Doris	Primary carer for resident grandchild plus baby sitting	√F*

\*F indicates those grandmothers in receipt of family allowance.

The time that the women spent in caring activities in an average week varied from full-time care to zero (see Table 9). I have indicated whether or not they were paid for this care work and whether they were in receipt of Family Allowance for their grandchild. Where they cared for more than one grandchild the figure represents the total amount of time expended. Emma and Lorna also shared the childcare with their resident daughters. Jane provided care only during school holidays while Laura's grandchildren only came for holiday visits

### **Grandmothers acting as full-time surrogate mothers**

The first category of women - those who care for their grandchildren full-time as surrogate mothers - were represented by three of the total sample of twenty, Doris, Maureen and Phyllis. Although it could be argued that two other women, Emma and Lorna, who were supporting dependent teenage mothers were, in fact, being both mother to their daughters and at times acting as 'mothers' to their grandchildren I have not included these women in this category as the grandchild's mother was also doing the mothering.

Doris, the first grandmother in this group, has carried out the role of surrogate mother to her grandson, now aged seventeen, for two years. Doris is sixty-three years old and has eight grandchildren. One grandson came to live with her after a family crisis. Since leaving home, Adrian has had no contact with his stepfather and very little contact with his mother. Doris and her husband<sup>31</sup> have supported their grandson both materially and emotionally ever since. They have done everything that parents would do for their child, from providing him with a place to live, to feeding and clothing him and giving him advice and emotional support. They have supported him through his transition from secondary school to taking up an apprenticeship and college training.

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<sup>31</sup> Doris's husband was retired when I interviewed her but died soon afterwards. She carried on caring for her grandson on her own. I heard recently that he has since moved into separate accommodation.

As a retired couple on a fixed income they have found the financial cost of providing for a growing teenager very high and are now finding their involvement in his social life difficult at times. However, they also report his being with them as rewarding in many ways.

*Doris:* Yes, I wouldn't mind if he decided he was going to stay till he was old enough to sort of depend on himself. And we've got used to having him, and he does make us laugh, and he makes us active as well. Yeah, he definitely makes us more active. Perhaps you think you've got to be up in the morning because Adrian's got to go to college or he's got to go to work. You've got to be up and about around teatime and you make the effort to make a proper meal because Adrian will be coming in from his work. Whereas, you know, we didn't notice before, but you notice it afterwards, the two of you, you think 'we'll just have something quick', now we make a proper meal every day.

However, when asked how she would feel if he went back to his mother's home to live her answer was uncertain:

*Doris:* Uh, I feel a bit mixed. It would be nice to have the house back to the two of us again in some ways, and it would be nice to make arrangements without your first thought being about Adrian. It was like having dad live with us you know, your first thought was about dad. But on the other hand, I don't know why I think it, but I think if he stayed with us he would be safer. I feel he's unsafe if he goes home. (Doris, aged 63).

Divorce and alcohol abuse both figure in this story. Doris is aware that Adrian's stepfather is an alcoholic and is aware that he is capable of being violent. Doris's concerns about her grandson's safety therefore override her own needs and she is prepared to keep him with her until such time as she feels he is capable of supporting himself.

The second grandmother in this category, Maureen, took on the full time care of her grandson after her son's ex-wife literally 'dumped' her nine year old son on the father's door step. The mother had decided she could no longer cope with him. Maureen's son also felt that he could not manage to care for his son and, faced with the possibility of their grandchild being placed in the care of the social services, Maureen

and her husband decided to take responsibility for him. Maureen recalled:

*Maureen:* Mat rang us up and said Lynn's dumped Charlie at my house and said that she can't cope with him anymore, 'and she's had him nine years and I can have him nine years', so umm, Alan, Al just said to me when he got off the phone, 'get in the car and go fetch him cos nobody wants him'. So I went and fetched him and I have had him ever since.

Although it was Maureen's husband who made the initial decision to take on the responsibility of caring for their grandson, it was Maureen who gave up her valued part-time job and took on the full-time work of caring for a troubled child. Both Doris and Maureen felt that they had no other option open to them but to take their grandchildren in. They felt that in a time of crisis they had a responsibility of care towards their grandchildren. As Maureen said:

*Maureen:* He didn't give us an option. What can you do? I didn't want – I mean he didn't want to go back to his mother because it's not a settled life there is it? His [her son's] girlfriend wouldn't have him so what could you do? (Maureen, aged 65)

In this particular case both of Charlie's parents had new partners who also had children of their own. It appears that both new partners considered Charlie's behavior to be a problem they could not manage to cope with.

Phyllis has also taken on the full-time responsibility of her grandson and has gained legal custody of him. She has cared for him full-time since he was four months old. In this particular case the grandchild appears to think of his grandmother as his mother, actually calling her 'mum'. He has had no contact with his birth mother since he was two years old. He is now fourteen years old.

So-called 'reconstituted' families bring with them many challenges, both for parents and children. Taking on the responsibility for another



person's child, especially an estranged partner in an acrimonious divorce, can be extremely difficult and a challenge that some partners may choose not to take up. A common factor in the three cases mentioned is that the parents of the children, both mothers and fathers, felt able to abdicate responsibility for their children, whereas the grandparents were unable to do so. Is this, as some of the women felt, an example of how two different generations relate to notions of duty, obligation and familial responsibility? Do the younger generation have a stronger commitment to their own needs as individuals while the older generation feel a responsibility to the wider family? These are some of the questions that I will return to later.

### **Grandmothers caring for grandchildren while mothers work**

At the time of interviewing, thirteen of the grandmothers cared for their grandchildren on a regular basis in order for the child's mother to work. Increasingly young women with dependent children are returning to work after having children (Oppenheimer, 1994; Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, 1995). Britain has a very poor track record in providing adequate, affordable, child care facilities, with demand constantly outstripping supply. It is grandmothers who often fill this considerable gap in childcare provision (McGlone et al., 1996) despite the fact that many of the grandmothers also work. This is a factor that has been confirmed by my data. Kate's story illustrates the problems faced by a working mother. Kate's daughter is a young single mother attempting to become independent by training as a nurse. She lives separately from her mother but relies heavily on Kate for child-care and emotional support. But as Kate makes clear, the daily problems faced by many working mums are numerous:

*Kate:* You know it is absolutely hopeless. I mean, you know even when she gets to school, I mean this is the worst stage, mothers who I have talked to about it have said this, this is the very worst because at least at nursery you can drop them off at eight and don't have to pick them up again until six, but you know, it's just this collision or correlation of Susan working full-time and

Hannah going to this Primary school nursery class, in fact she put her off for a term going to the nursery class, because that was only in the afternoon from 1.15pm to 3.15pm, and you know, I said to Susan 'it is simply not worth it, you know this child is going to be pushed from pillar to post'. And the headmaster was somewhat sniffy about this, and wondered why she wanted to do such a thing, as if it wasn't as plain as the nose on your face, so I think, as I say, schools could be a bit more accommodating and, but certainly nursing, because the profession needs to get its act together, the NHS, there'd not be a problem with recruitment you know if they could do something. You see the morning shift is worse than the afternoon because Susan's has to be there at seven thirty, then she doesn't finish until after one. Well, that is two slots of the day, you know, it is the early morning and then the lunchtime to cover. We are all sorted out at the moment now because she gets her break, three quarters of an hour break, and picks Hannah up from Nursery School and then takes her to nursery class (at the Primary School). [...] which is wrong – I mean my son is up in arms about it – he is saying Susan ought to be having a break then.[...] You know it is there for a purpose you know for relaxation, not for driving half way across [...]. (Kate, aged 55).

This group of grandmothers felt that they were the preferred carers for a number of reasons, but mainly because they were a more adaptable source of childcare and they could fit in around different working patterns and school hours and school holidays. This would seem to confirm findings that older women are less involved in work as a career than younger women (Walby, 1997). Their previous choices to leave work to care for children, and the need to be more flexible in the type of work they took up, has thus limited the kinds of job opportunities available to them. Ironically their age and the previous pattern of their working lives has made them less likely to be in work (Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, 1995) and therefore more available to be utilised by younger women to enable them to work.

My participants reported filling in those difficult areas of childcare such as having children to sleep over if parents were on night shifts or early starts. They felt as grandmothers they were able to offer the child extra love and attention – the next best thing to a mother - causing less disruption in the child's life. A further issue for many of the

grandmothers was the reliability and safety of child-minders. Grandmothers felt that they were a better, safer and more reliable source of childcare. Helen talked about her feelings concerning the possibility of her granddaughter being looked after by a child-minder:

*Helen:* I wouldn't have liked Anna to have had to have gone to somebody that she didn't know, every day for a full day. I should have been annoyed and upset if she'd just gone ahead and said 'well I want to go to work and Anna's going to so and so'. I would have been quite upset, well I'd have been upset actually and a bit cross as well.

When asked why she might have felt this way she said:

*Helen:* With child-minders you don't know what's going on behind those doors do you really?

Connecting the safety of their grandchildren with the perceived risks associated with strangers other than child-minders was an issue raised many times by the women in this study. Helen spoke about her worries about her grandchild playing in the street:

*Helen:* She doesn't at the moment, and I'm hoping she never ever wants to because not only, you don't know who's about, I mean there's boys, there's been one or two girls assaulted in S. actually, and only a young girl about six or seven, and this was last summer, and it just worries you to death. Also the traffic up this main street now with W's, I wouldn't dare let them down there not until they maybe got to twelve or thirteen, not with the roads and the wagons coming up and down. (Helen, aged 54).

Connie had first hand experience of the problems her daughter had experienced in finding a suitable child minder for her grandson. The problems caused Connie to feel that she could probably have done a better job in looking after her grandson and that she should have given up her own work.

*Connie:* It did get difficult because of the hours that she worked and I couldn't fill in for the times when she needed me because of the work I was doing. I was going to, I really considered being a child minder and I rang up to find out if I could go on a course

because she could get an allowance. Although no, ..I could get paid if I was a child minder but if I wasn't registered then she couldn't pay me anything and er, at that time I just couldn't afford to give my work up. So between us we eventually got a very nice person as a child minder but to do it all again, I would have given my work up, I would have looked after him.

Int: Why do you say that?

*Connie:* Well because he's a difficult child and I don't know what's caused it. If he was going to be like he is anyway, but er, ...one, two, three, he's on his fourth child minder. The first one was a young girl and she seemed fine but Sally took him away from her because there were certain things that she did that Sally didn't agree with and anyway that fizzled out. Then we got him with a friend of mine and she was super but she found him difficult to handle.

After several more incidents that Jack's mother found unacceptable with different child minders he was now with someone that she was happy with and whom she felt could cope with Jack. However, the series of events that preceded this had led Connie to feel that she should have given up her work:

*Connie:* All of them were registered child minders, but rather than him go through all those four I would, with hindsight, I should have given my work up.

Int: Why do you say you should – is it your responsibility?

*Connie:* No it isn't is it, it isn't my responsibility but I just feel as though it might have made a big difference. (Connie, aged 51).

The 'preference' for grandmothers to take on the role of child-minder may be as much influenced by cost as any other reason. My data show that grandmothers acting as child-minders were much less expensive than paying for formal childcare. The new Family Credit<sup>32</sup> may have made some differences, but this was not fully in place when the interviews were carried out. Many of my participants said that their daughters or daughters-in-law would not be able to work if they had to

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<sup>32</sup> Recent changes in the tax system (2002 –2003) have meant that parents can receive considerable assistance in meeting the costs of childcare.

pay for nursery schools or child-minders. Angela, when speaking about her daughter's problems with childcare, said 'there was no way she would have sent them to a child-minder, no way'. When asked why this was the case she replied:

*Angela:* I think just for the simple fact, well one thing would be the money side because I mean she did look into it when I was first poorly, and it was a friend of hers, so it wasn't like somebody she didn't know, and they would do it a bit cheaper deal for her sort of thing. Well I mean it was going to be four hundred pounds a month, well it isn't worth working is it? (Angela, aged 52).

Gayle spoke about the prohibitive costs of nursery care. She and her daughter both work and try to manage the care of two grandchildren between them. However, there are times when they need to use the local nursery school. When discussing the costs of childcare Gayle said:

*Gayle:* She pays twelve pounds per session and I'm not sure if it starts at eight or nine till one o'clock and then a one till five thirty session. So it's twelve pounds for morning or twelve pounds an afternoon but if you go all day it's seventeen pounds fifty. I think she had a letter yesterday to say it was going up and it was eighteen pounds for a day or seventy-eight pounds for a week. (Gayle, aged 53).

For others, such as Helen's daughter, the cost of seventy pounds or more a week for a full time nursery school place was not an option:

*Helen:* You really need a good job don't you to pay something like that. You really need to be a professional, a doctor or an accountant or something to be able to afford that kind of quality care. I think when the children are three now don't they get vouchers for a nursery, but I think really if there is a grandparent there then it is much better for the child to go there. (Helen, aged 54).

Such problems are probably not isolated incidences, as in the rural area of North Yorkshire the kinds of jobs available for women are often at the minimum wage level. In addition, local employers are predominantly in

the agricultural, service and tourist industries and therefore the working hours are not 'child friendly'.

Fitting the lives of a working couple around childcare is further complicated when the grandmother who is filling in some of the childcare needs is also working. Seven out of the thirteen grandmothers in this category also work, two full-time and the rest part-time. Hochschild's (1997) notion of a 'time famine' is clearly visible in this situation and time-management skills were evident in several of the homes I visited. A noted feature was a timetable, often on the fridge door, setting out the routine of taking and picking children up from school, after school clubs, dentists' and doctors' appointments, hairdressing appointments, birthday parties, football matches, dance classes and so on. Getting children to such events on time appeared to take a great deal of forward planning and co-operation between the women. On two occasions text messages were sent and received during the interview, adjusting and changing plans concerning childcare. Gayle's situation illustrates the difficulties of combining work and childcare and her excellent time-management skills. Gayle explained her routine for the coming week:

*Gayle:* I have a list. That's why when you rang up and you said when can you come [shows the list to interviewer].

*Int:* It's like a timetable.

*Gayle:* I know, but I keep this because she [the mother] is on a four week rota. Actually she's doing me a new one so now we're here, that's April, so I did January. So I'm not on there now you see. KC, this is all her shifts at work – so this tells me whenever she's at work see. So Saturday morning I'm on the football run and Cub run. But Sunday her husband's at home so I don't have to do anything. So this is my four week rota and its why if anybody rings up and says 'Can you?' I need to check.

*Int:* So in an average week then, looking at that timetable, how many hours do you spend looking after your grandchildren, ferrying them backwards and forwards?

*Gayle:* It depends what shift she's on. This week I'll start on

Saturday, he sleeps on a Friday night so on the Saturday morning he has to be at the swimming pool at 8.00 am for swimming, we'll come home at 9.15am and have breakfast and we have to be at football at 10.00am until 12.00am and then I pick him up and then I relinquish my job for the day. And then Sunday we don't usually see him – I did last week because it was mother's day. Depending what hours she's working I take him to school in the morning, I go up about 8.45 am. I work in town so to go to work is not out of my way. And then if she's at work he goes to After School Club and then I leave work at 4.00pm, come and get my car and I will go and pick Leigh up there first (school) and then I have to go to Nursery and pick Emma up and cos she's on late shift I'll feed them. So they come for tea, I did that Monday and Tuesday this week, today I'm not working. I'm not doing anything. I'm going up for a cup of tea later, but I'm not on duty today or again tomorrow – but tomorrow I will go with her because when Kathy is at work on a Thursday I take Emma to Mum's and Tots at the church for an hour in the afternoon, so she can get to play with others. Then Friday I'm picking them both up from school. I'm not at work but she is, but I'll just walk and pick up Leigh up at 3.15pm and bring them home, feed them, cos Leigh's at cubs at 6.00pm. So, it's twenty to twenty five hours a week.

Gayle, in talking about the two different kinds of 'work' that she does, that is, her 'paid' work and her 'childcare' work/responsibilities, does not appear to prioritise one above the other – it is just what has to be done. Despite this kind of time-juggling at times additional people were needed as a back up when neither woman could fit their work around the children's needs. Filling in the gaps was something that was mostly done by fathers, but often other members of the family were called upon:

*Gayle:* Then, because I worked ten till two and she worked afternoons, so it would coincide [1.00pm until 2.00pm both were working]. But there would be a time, different shifts different times, but if she was going on earlies, like one o'clock, great granddad would come and look after him for an hour while he (the grandchild) was asleep and while I got home. He would come ....if it was summer he would put him in the pram in the garden and he'd potter in the garden. So great granddad did it while I came home. (Gayle, aged 53).

In order to meet the varying needs of their individual familial circumstances the number of hours grandmothers spend caring for their grandchildren varies significantly. In some cases it is an occasional hour after school, in others it is regular eight-hour days five days a week and sometimes it is full-time, taking on the main parental role (see Table 9).

However, out of the total sample of twenty grandmothers, what is surprising is that only six received any kind of payment for this work, varying from an hourly rate to occasional lump sum amounts. For those grandmothers who acted as surrogate mothers, all three were in receipt of child benefit (see Table 9). However, only one grandmother, Maureen, received remuneration on a fairly regular basis from the father of the child, while another, the father of Doris's grandson, paid pocket money to his child. In all three cases it was the grandparents who were meeting the greater part of the cost of providing for their grandchild. Maureen, however, did get some help with the added financial pressures she encountered. Maureen received a weekly amount for her grandson's keep (see Table 9).

*Maureen:* Originally, his dad used to give us fifteen pounds a week, but it used to cost me nearly that much for his bus fare and his dinners at school when he went to big school and so we asked for more and he gave us thirty pound and then he put it up to forty five over the years – I mean that doesn't cover everything does it really, but it helped anyway and Alan (her husband) was working at the time. (Maureen, aged 65).

Only one of the twenty grandmothers, Angela, was paid a regular hourly rate for the work she carried out caring for her two grandchildren. Faith and Helen received some money at irregular intervals. Only one of the grandmothers, Maureen, said that payment for childcare had ever been an issue but this comment must be viewed in the light of Maureen receiving Family Allowance and a contribution from the father of the child towards his upkeep. In most cases it appeared that the grandmothers enjoyed giving their time and money to their



grandchildren. My analysis of why this should be the case is discussed in detail in Chapter Six.

### **Divorce of grandchild's parents and the problems of childcare**

In keeping with other research findings, divorce and the problems of childcare have emerged as major factors in this study (Dench and Thomson, 1999). Ten of the grandmothers became involved with caring for their grandchildren as a direct result of the divorce of one of their own children. In seven of these cases it was the mother who had custody of the children. In two of the remaining cases, (Maureen and Phyllis) when the father was left with the child, it was the grandmother who took on the role of surrogate mother. In Phyllis's case she went to court and gained legal custody of her grandchild. In both of these cases the father's new partner was not willing to take on the full-time care of a child from a previous marriage. Both grandmothers were openly critical of the behaviour of the other women in this respect. Maureen discussed the events that took place prior to her taking her grandson on as a full-time surrogate mother. Her son was considering placing his son in the care of the social services because his new partner would not take on the responsibility of his son:

*Maureen:* I mean he were in a dilemma really, I mean he had just settled with somebody and she had two children and she didn't want him (Maureen's grandchild). What were he to do? He either were to give all that up what he had got, for his child, which I think he should have done but....Well, I think she should have taken him, because I think, I mean, I could never have done that with any child, I mean, you take them in don't you, whoever they are? But young women these days don't want to know do they? They don't want it. I mean he sort of took her and her two boys; he took them on as if they were his own, but yet she wouldn't have his. (Maureen, aged 65).

Examining this statement it appears that Maureen feels that the attitudes of the two generations are quite distinct. There is a sense in Maureen's statement that it would have been in some way 'unnatural' or immoral not to take her grandson in; not to do so would have gone

against the cultural norms and ideals, as she understood them, about being a mother and a woman. The ability of her son to place his relationship with his partner before his son she felt was morally wrong, and the ability of the younger woman to refuse to care for the child seemed to Maureen to be an 'unnatural' response for a woman. The 'naturalness' of maternal love was particularly emphasised in the childcare manual of Dr. Spock (1988), first published in the 1960s, and later, Dr. Jolly's guide to parenting (1986), both of which would perhaps have been relevant to a woman of Maureen's age. Questioning the authenticity of maternal love did not appear to be something that Maureen had done.

What was clear from the interviews was how important the extended family became during crisis periods prior to and during a divorce. Betty remembered the point at which her daughter decided that her marriage was over and that she wanted a divorce.

*Betty:* Carol was having a lot of trouble with her husband and it got a bit nasty. She said 'I think we'd better get divorced' and I said 'Certainly you must, you can't put up with that'. And we gave her a bedroom and they came here, and I said 'Now what are you going to do?'. She said 'well I'll have to work to keep the family'. She started to look out for a little house and so she stayed with us for nine months until she found one.

All of the grandmothers interviewed felt that it was important for women to work after divorce in order to avoid what they saw as the 'poverty trap' of becoming dependent on state benefits such as Income Support. To help relieve these problems, several grandmothers helped out financially with anything from fuel bills to pocket money. However, the most important contribution they made was to provide (mainly) free and adequate childcare. Recognising the need for single mothers to continue with or develop a career that would pay enough to support their families, and the difficulties of balancing this with childcare, was the reason why six of grandmothers had taken on an extensive caring role. This was very clear in the case of Betty's daughter. Betty's

daughter had one child in nursery school and two at junior school and had been just about managing financially on a part-time job clerical job. However, in order to be independent, she needed to take on a full-time position. This would enable her to buy her own property and support her children but, by doing so, her childcare problems would become much more acute. Betty was aware that:

*Betty...this was the only alternative because to get on she had to be full time. If she took part-time she wouldn't have enough to buy a house. (Betty, aged 69).*

Betty, seeing the long-term picture and the need for her daughter to improve her earning capacity, helped her daughter with the complex childcare problems that are common for single working mothers with children at school. As was the case with many of the other grandmothers, Betty filled in the gaps in childcare provision, such as after school care and during school holidays that other forms of childcare do not fully accommodate, or which are often too expensive for parents to consider. Without Betty's help her daughter would not have been able to make the move from part-time to full-time employment.

Jane was also involved with the care of two of her grandchildren in order to assist her daughter develop her career options. Her contribution was vital in enabling the mother to support herself and her children and provide for a better future. Two of her grandchildren came to live with her during the summer holidays:

*Jane: I was always glad for them to come. They were never any trouble, just Jamie sometimes being how boys are, but we got along. We spent a lot of time on the beach in the chalet and such like so they had a good time. And Helen, well it gave her a better chance really. She was always very grateful. And I think she enjoyed the time to herself – she met Bill that way and now they are doing well. (Jane, aged 82).*

Their mother took her annual leave over the rest of the school holidays and sent the children to their grandmother at the seaside for the summer. This arrangement seemed to work well for all parties concerned and carried on for six years. The mother used the summer holidays to study for professional exams and so improve her career options and earning potential.

Yet another aspect of the help provided by grandmothers in the aftermath of divorce was as an emotional prop, offering security and stability for both the grandchildren and their parents in a time of crisis. Concealing their own feelings in times of family crisis and placing the needs of others first was a skill that my participants had developed and, to some extent, appeared to be expected of them. The provision of this vitally important emotion work<sup>33</sup> was a major finding of this study in line with other recent research (Attias-Donfut and Segalen, 2002). Support was varied; for instance telephoning each day, giving mothers a break away from their children, boosting egos and 'just being there' to listen. When explaining why she helps her daughter who is bringing up two girls alone Irene said:

*Irene:* It's just a way of making their little lives a bit brighter. I mean you don't think about why you do it; you just sort of do it. If Karen is getting at the end of her tether I'll say 'just go in the shower Karen while I'...you know, and it makes such a world of difference to their lives with their mum. I am a calming influence, many times she says 'oh thank goodness you are there I'm always in panic mode'. (Irene, aged 53).

The ability to offer a form of counseling and ease emotional wounds was something all of the grandmothers felt was a definite skill that they had gained from years of experience caring for their own family. They appeared to feel that they had developed a kind of understanding over the years and knew how to respond to situations without panicking or

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<sup>33</sup> The concept of emotion work is something discussed in Hochschild (1983) in relation to the airline industry. This concept applies to many areas of life, not least the family, and grandmothers. The grandmothers were adept at concealing their own emotions in order to provide comfort and support to their children in times of crisis.

becoming over anxious. Several reported feeling that they were more patient and understanding as grandmothers than they had been as mothers and saw themselves as a calming influence in their families. Faith felt that she had accrued a great deal of experience in how to handle relationship problems:

*Faith:* I don't know, I just think it comes with experience<sup>^</sup>. I can see things coming and diffuse the situation before it gets a problem – especially with the children, you can see when it's just because they are tired, and they're not really being naughty, and you know, they just need to be settled down, but younger ones are so involved with their own problems, and their day that they think they are being naughty and then they lose their temper<sup>^</sup> – I can see both sides, so I can be on both sides if you like, and I'm not making things worse. They've both said that, you know, that I calm things down and they know I'm there for them. (Faith, aged 53).

The capacity to calm situations and be able to manage family situations was part of the 'ideal' model attributed to the role of a grandmother, and was a feature that arose in almost all of the women's stories, either as something they aspired to or as part of their role within their families. Investing love in their families in return for feeling needed and loved in return would seem to have some parallel meaning with Hochschild's notion that women make a 'resource out of feeling and offer it to men as a gift in return for the more material resources they lack' (1983:163). If we substitute children and grandchildren for men, there is an argument to be made that in the case of grandmothers, they do this for their children and grandchildren, not for the material resources they lack, but in return for love and feeling needed. The immediate return on what could be termed 'caring capital' that is invested in their grandchildren was reported as the love and pleasure they gained from the relationship. However, in some cases it could be said that the grandmothers were hoping to 'cash in' some of this investment in the future when they too might be in need of care. The notion of reciprocity in kin relations and ways in which older women as grandmothers

appear to offer their time as a gift in return for love, is something that I will return to in Chapter Six.

### **Responding to problematic lifestyles**

Grandmothers often find themselves responding to the particular problems arising out of the lifestyle led by their children (Eden, 2000). As well as divorce which has already been addressed, drug addiction and alcohol abuse were serious issues for a number of the grandmothers in this study, such as Phyllis, Irene, Emma and Kate. Phyllis's daughter-in-law had an alcohol problem which led to Phyllis bringing up her grandson. Irene's daughter's partner's prison sentence and drug addiction caused serious anxieties and financial problems. As mentioned earlier, Doris took on the responsibility of caring for her grandson full-time because of her fears for his safety due the alcohol abuse of his step-father.

Generational differences around 'wanting to have a good time' featured in five of the women's stories, including Emma's. Emma's daughter's involvement with drugs and alcohol at fifteen and the birth of her grandson caused the family, and Emma in particular, immense distress. She felt that her daughter was 'out of control' and 'too irresponsible' to care for a child.

Kate's worries about her son's drug addiction were aggravated when he became a father. She tries to help her son and his family in practical ways, such as by making sure the rent gets paid, paying her grandson's nursery fees and checking that they have filled in the appropriate forms to claim social security benefits. The child's other grandparents also contribute to the support of their child and grandchild. However, during the interview, Kate's worry and distress about her grandson's future was clearly evident, especially when she spoke about the risks he might be exposed to as a result of the chaotic, unstructured lifestyle she saw as being centered around drug culture:

*Kate:* So they certainly have grandparent support and it hasn't been so much from us on a day to day but more financial – primarily it's drug related yeah [her need to give financial help]. Yeah, I mean, although it is not explicitly said, the money, but you know, one assumes that it is the case or where else are they going to get the bloody money?^

Int: How do you feel about that?

*Kate:* Oh well depressed, angry, frustrated because it is very, very difficult to do anything helpful, you know you do feel powerless, you know it is just such a waste^ of a life you know, just a total waste^. ...it's just a constant battle even to make sure that the rent gets paid^....

Kate expressed other concerns about the cleanliness of her grandson's home and with trying to keep some kind of order and routine for him. Her intervention, however, is something that she has to carefully negotiate with her son and his partner:

*Kate:* What I try to do is to do it when Paula is at work, like I said 'Would you like me to come in and spring clean the place because I could do it while watching Tom?' But they obviously didn't want me there.....I mean Paula's dad, he pops in once a week and says 'right let's do the washing up' and Paula, if she is in the mood, she would agree, but it's the sort of shame and laziness and you know all those things, muddled up from their point of view, but quite honestly, I'm not wanting to be judgmental at all I just want the place to be vaguely hygienic for their sake and also for Tom's. You know, Tom is quite often not very well and his (other) grandmother and grandfather were talking about it the other day and I think he was quite concerned, he wasn't saying 'I think it's because they don't keep the place clean enough', but I'm sure that was the hidden curriculum. ...they are incredibly inefficient. [.....] You know as well, and you know things like even just sort of – oh you shouldn't have got me started on this (A) – and even things like putting the bloody milk^ bottles out...Ohhhhhh, you know....

Kate cried when speaking about the circumstances surrounding her son's drug addiction and the possible effect it might have on her grandson. The interview had to be suspended while she recomposed herself. Later in the interview Kate described the hopelessness she felt about the situation:

*Kate: You know as a child that has been so carefully nurtured [meaning her son] and given ....and end up in such a bloody mess....you know what the hell is the hope for Tom^! (Kate, aged 55).*

A common theme throughout these interviews was that these women felt that they could not abandon their grandchildren in situations where they could possibly be at risk. This concern about their grandchildren's future well-being was one of the main reasons for these women taking on more responsibility than would normally be the case for their grandchildren. These extra responsibilities, however, had an impact on some participants' expectations of grandmotherhood. Kate, Emma, Maureen and Connie all spoke about how the expected pleasures of being a grandmother were undermined at times by their worries and concerns for their grandchildren and their children.

### **Grandmothers of grandchildren born to teenage mothers**

Five participants had daughters who had been teenage mothers. This group of women reported feeling drawn into the situation, in some cases against the wishes of their husbands, in order to help their daughters cope with what they knew would be a difficult time. They felt that it was not a matter of choice, but just something that 'had to be done'. The welfare of their daughters throughout pregnancy and subsequent birth was their first concern. They perceived that the well-being of the mother and child had to be placed above any personal concerns or needs. Lorna, Emma and Kate all wanted to be with their daughters at the birth but, as their daughters' boyfriends also wished to be there, they were unable to do so. For these women this was a difficult and worrying time. They all were concerned that their daughters were too young to be going through childbirth and wanted to be there to give their support. When asked if she was present when her grandson was born Emma replied:



*Emma:* No I wasn't unfortunately. That's a regret, but the circumstances were that she was with a partner at the time... and it was his choice that he didn't want to share that moment with anybody else. I think probably if had been Julie's own decision she would have made a decision for me to kind of, like, be there. So a regret in that instance. (Emma, aged 42).

Irene and Gayle, on the other hand, were both with their daughters when they gave birth. Gayle described the experience as:

*Gayle:* Wonderful! I didn't think I'd stay standing, but I did. She'd split with her boyfriend but she wanted me to go with her. I got an early morning call you know, so off we went and yeh, it was lovely. I wouldn't have missed that.....I stayed there the whole time and, I think more frustrated the fact they you know what pain they're going through and that you can't say it will get better because you know full well before she had it that it's going to get worse. I was like Kate's go between, you know, was she ready, wasn't she ready. I think the actual pushing and the baby, being there actually bodily pushing on me to have the baby was something that I'll just never forget. (Gayle, aged 53).

### *Intergenerational Living*

Living arrangements are an important factor that can affect the relationship between grandmothers, their child/ren and their grandchildren. Four of the grandmothers, Phyllis, Maureen, Lorna and Doris, each had one grandchild residing with them. Emma occasionally had her grandchild staying with her for extended periods and Angela had two of her grandchildren living with her for long periods of time in the past. Lorna, Emma and Angela have all had their grandchildren living with them because of the circumstances around their daughters' teenage pregnancies. However, situations change: in Angela's case her daughter is now married and in a stable relationship; in Lorna's case her daughter and granddaughter are still living with her but her daughter is now teaching, having achieved both first and a post graduate degrees. Lorna has kept me up to date with her daughter's progress and is extremely proud of her daughter's achievements. The situation for Emma remains difficult, however, as her daughter has had another child since the time of the interview. Emma continues to be a major

source of help and support to her daughter and her grandchildren.

### *Double Mothering*

My research findings add weight to previous research that recognises two elements of successful grand mothering as non-interference (Tunaley, 1998) and having the *choice* of level of contact and responsibility for the grandchild (Fischer, 1983). Clearly these conditions are difficult to achieve in situations where the mother is herself still regarded as a child, and where three generations are likely to be living in the same household or to have a dependent relationship. This issue of what I shall call 'double mothering' proved to be a very difficult area for the grandmothers in my study to manage. Experiencing mothering in parallel with assisting their daughters to mother and grandmothering in a way that often came closer to mothering created particular problems of defining roles and setting boundaries. Many women struggled to find the right balance between taking over the mothering of the grandchild and supporting their daughters to do it themselves and had different strategies for coping. For example, Emma recalled the situation shortly after her daughter gave birth at age fifteen:

*Emma:* I've got to really stand back before getting too involved, yeh, I think I have to really stop myself becoming mum to both of them and I really feel it's important that Julie recognises the position that she has, you know that she's Kyle's mum, and I wouldn't want to get that confused for her...It's very difficult to take a back seat as well, and I really had to keep stopping myself from taking over. Julie was quite depressed as well at the time, probably very anxious as well. She kind of felt quite unreal about the whole situation, so instead of taking over completely, I just kind of like had to encourage Julie to kind of bond with the baby. She would have given up quite easily for me to take over. I really believe that my purpose as a grandmother is to be supportive to my daughter^, objective enough to kind of like, be able to, with Kyle, treat him with respect and concern and you know, be kind of like removed enough from him not to be too emotionally embroiled with him.

Knowing when and how to support and encourage her daughter as a new mother and knowing when to take a back seat, allowing her daughter to find her own way, required Emma to negotiate her way around some very delicate issues. Inevitably, the relationship between mother and daughter went through a period of change. Speaking about what her daughter wants out of her relationship with her as her mother Emma said:

*Emma:* She is very hit and miss, Julie, in her expectations. She changes from one moment to the next<sup>^</sup>. It's typical of a teenager. Sometimes she likes me to kind of like be her mum but other times she wants to take on the role and wants to be mum in control. So it's a kind of an odd scenario to be in sometimes. I don't think she has any kind of expectations of what she wants. She does want support and she really appreciates deeply the support that I've given her. That's probably concreted our relationship more<sup>^</sup>. It's made it more, it's probably bonded us in a better way really because, previous to her having Kyle, our relationship was just going downhill, it was getting worse and worse and Julie was really getting more and more out of control<sup>^</sup>, so it's been a saving grace in a lot of ways her having a child. (Emma, aged 42).

Despite these participants' concerns about their daughters being teenage mothers, most admitted that positive things had emerged from the situation, not least a new grandchild. Emma's relationship with her daughter had improved; Lorna's daughter had gained a degree and Kate's daughter had completed her nursing training.

However, there were areas of ambivalence also. Lorna spoke about her concerns that her grandchild might come to think of her as the mother:

*Lorna:* That was something that worried me>, with having her at home, because I always remember I used to work with a woman, years ago, in the office at M's and she worked full-time and her mum looked after her daughter for her, and when her daughter was poorly she didn't want anything to do with her mum, she wanted the grandma and she used to push the mum away and it, she used to be really upset, she used to say 'she didn't want me' and it used to really upset her and I thought well, I didn't want

that happening. So, if she is on with something I'll say to her 'go and ask mummy, get mummy to do it' you know, and send her in Jenny's direction.

However, even though Lorna was aware of trying to make the roles of mother and grandmother clear for her granddaughter, the reality of the situation was that many times Lorna was the one that her granddaughter came to. It was Lorna that she came to in the morning:

*Lorna:* Unfortunately it's me that she does go in to, what ever day it is she wakes up at the crack of dawn, and you know, I hear her shouting 'grandma are you there?' and then she comes hunting you, you know, and so she does sort of come to me.

Lorna saw her position as 'grandmother' as indistinct from that of 'mother', with the boundaries between the two not clearly defined:

*Lorna:* I think that's where I have a bit of trouble with her being in the house all the time. We don't have that separate, you know, whereas if she lived away from me, you'd plan your day for that day when she comes and you would get everything ready so you were going out and you were going to the park and doing things. I think that's why it is a bit mixed. I think you are mothering with her being there at home. [...] Megan is part of our family and she is like just another... [child] it's like at meal times she is there at the table, it's just like part of the family, and I think you don't feel like you're, I don't feel like I'm her grandmother. Yet I try to keep that I'm her grandmother, but I find, I do think it is a difficult thing when they are there all the time. (Lorna, aged 47).

Lorna's experience of having three generations living in the same household emphasises the conflict for many women in a similar situation. Making the distinction between being a mother and being a grandmother proved difficult to achieve and Lorna's situation was further problematised by having an understanding of what a 'proper grandmother' should be/do, based on her understanding of the 'ideal' model (see Table 7). Yet not all of the grandmothers reacted in the same way. Irene, faced with the prospect of her teenage daughter becoming a mother, decided on a different strategy. She made the decision from the outset that her daughter was not going to live with her

and made the situation very clear from the beginning that she would help her daughter but that she would have to learn to stand on her own two feet:

*Irene:* Once she decided that she was going to keep the baby we said 'well, you know it is up to you'. We did put a condition on it that she would never come back home because I don't think three generations in a house, whether it's the top end of the scale or the bottom end of the scale, I don't think it works. I said we would back her; we would do what we could for her. I'd go round, you know, we'd help her find a house, but no way would she come home. It was the hardest decision I've ever made in my life but I don't regret it at all. (Irene, aged 53).

When three generations were living in the same household and the mother of the grandchild was still dependent both financially and emotionally on the mother, a problem of 'double mothering' arose. This situation caused conflict for the grandmother between mothering her own child and mothering her grandchild. As Lorna said, the grandchild simply became part of her family and there was no separation between the generations. For Irene this situation was eased by her decision to refuse to let her daughter live with her. Living in two separate households helped to create clearer boundaries and roles for mother and grandmother and thus provided her with what was, for her, a more satisfactory relationship both with her daughter and granddaughters.

### **'Proper' grandmothers: an ideal relationship**

Sixteen participants reported having what they felt was an almost 'textbook' relationship with at least one of their grandchildren, relationship which matched what they had hoped for and expected. This relationship was the closest to the 'ideal' model discussed in Table 7 in the sense that they felt that it was on their terms and in circumstances where they were complementing the role of the parents rather than compensating for parental shortfalls. Lorna spoke about her situation as the mother of a teenage mother as not fitting with her idea of what a 'proper' grandmother role should be:

*Loma:* I think it's more like a mother style in a way to being what I call 'a proper grandmother'.

Int: What do you mean by a proper grandmother?

*Loma:* A proper grandmother, how I would see it, is how my parents were. I went over there and I used to go across and we used to go over for tea and take them over to sit and visit. And grandmother spoils them to death and then you come away and they come round to baby-sit, but they aren't there a hundred percent of the time and you don't see them all the time, and I think that's the big difference with me.

For other grandmothers such as Maureen, Kate and Connie, their problematic relationships with one or more of their grandchildren did not fit with an ideal model of grandmothering, therefore, having a 'normal' relationship was a complete contrast. In describing her relationship with another grandchild Kate said:

*Kate:* Oh, brilliant<sup>^</sup>, total grandparenthood [laughs], just admire – I don't have to do anything<sup>^</sup>- buy her the odd birthday present – buy her the odd pretty dress – stand by while son and partner do a brilliant job of bringing Amy up – so it's totally different really. I mean, just sometimes quite painfully so really>.Int: It's such a contrast?

*Kate:* Such a contrast. I mean the good thing is that in some ways Susan [her daughter who is a single mother] has been in the middle cos, although she has been a brilliant mother – it's been much harder obviously with a useless partner and they haven't had the money, whereas Jim and Cath have, you know, a reasonable income for young people – they have a fairly biggish house for young people. Amy lacks absolutely nothing – she gets total stimulation from sort of dawn till dusk, you know just as it should be really.

Int: Is that what you had imagined being a grandmother would be?

*Kate:* That's what I thought being a grandmother would be like<sup>^</sup>. (Kate, aged 55).

One of the ideal situations associated with being a grandmother is therefore to feel free to have the choice of how much time to devote to a

grandchild. Not *having* to do anything was the defining factor for Kate. To feel obligated or expected to give up time to do things that were not seen as part of the model of being a grandmother, was something that brought with it negative responses.

*Susan:* My two sons don't expect me to *do* anything, they always give me plenty warning if they want me to baby sit – and if I say no<sup>^</sup>, they don't pressure me – they're fine – but my daughter, she sometimes<sup>^</sup> just seems to expect me to just drop everything and come running – cos her life is more important<sup>^</sup> – its partly because she is a single mum, but I said to her 'it was your choice not to have a man around' so she can't expect me to take up what a partner should be doing<sup>^</sup>. So sometimes I do say no. But it does make me feel guilty<sup>^</sup> and I don't like that. (Susan, aged 65).

It would appear that Susan feels torn between her feelings of 'duty' and her feelings of wanting time for herself and the ability to choose her own level of engagement with her grandchild. However, in contrast to this view, according to my participants, the most common benefit of being a grandmother rather than a mother was *having* more time, or being able to *make* time, to enjoy the more pleasurable aspects of caring for and about grandchildren. Time in this sense was pleasurable in that it was spent in relation to significant others. Hochschild (1983) has argued that women's 'capacity to manage feeling and do 'relational' work is for them an important resource' (1983:163). As Davies states, women spend their time in relation to the needs of others, 'more than any other family members - [their time] becomes others' time', the reason for this being that women's 'usage of time is shaped by gender relations in society, which determine women's positions, consciousness and actions' (Davies, 1990:38). However, for many of the grandmothers in this study, the capacity to give time was experienced with satisfaction:

*Irene:* Part of being a grandmother is having time – or making time. The difference I find between having your own and grandkids is like doing shepherds pie on a candlelit table, er it's just to make it a bit special really, it's that you've got time to do it. But I do think, yeh, you make time for them.

Int: And that's important?

*Irene:* That's right<sup>^</sup>. I mean, we only have them overnight, unless we are going anywhere>, but then they do get upset if they can't come. But I do think, yeh we do have time. We'll make time. (Irene, aged 53).

Again, for this situation to be regarded as satisfactory depended on the grandmother *choosing* to decide the level and kind of contact she has with her grandchildren. As with other studies, my participants recognised the rarity for women to have time to themselves (Chambers, 1986; Hochschild, 1989; Hochschild, 1997), or at least to be free from the demands of childcare, this being a stated reason for choosing to give help to the mothers of their grandchildren. Time in this respect was a precious commodity that was given and received with love. Hochschild's notion of 'time famine' was clearly evident in many of the women's families (1997). The complexity of the working lives of parents and trying to fit in the needs of children was something that all of the participants recognised. Gill felt that it was very important for mothers to have some *time to themselves*. Gill said:

*Gill:* I would say my eldest daughter gets a bit tired<sup>^</sup> with having three. Sometimes she'll say 'Oh mum I wish I'd only had two', but no>, I know for a fact that when I have the grandchildren it gives their mums a rest, they can have a bit of time on their own so then they're always pleased to have them back. (Gill, aged 51).

Lorna spoke about her wish to give her daughter time for herself:

*Lorna:* I quite often used to put her (grandchild) to bed for Jenny so she could get out cos I didn't want her not having a life<sup>^</sup>, cos I think she is still young<sup>^</sup> and she should still have time to go out with her friends and things. (Lorna, aged 47).

Mary was asked who she thought she was helping most when she had her grandchildren at her home, was it her own children or her grandchildren? Mary said that it was her children that she was helping but she felt 'rewarded' as she just loved having her grandchildren



around her:

*Mary:* I'm just always there if they need me, either babysitting, looking after them (the grandchildren) or meeting them from school - anything really, to give them some time to themselves. I just want to be there. It's my choice that I'm there – I like to take the pressure off if I can – but I just love having them around – they give me so much in return. (Mary, aged 61).

In these women's stories, then, there was very much a sense of their *giving* time as a gift of love and *receiving* love in return. This is both in the case of their children and their grandchildren. To have the pleasure of giving very much depends on the giver feeling that their gift is freely given, rather than being demanded of them or being taken for granted:

*Gayle:* Giving up your time is a sacrifice. I suppose because I like to do crafty things and that takes time, and I don't do as many as I want – but I do them in the evening when I haven't got them [the grandchildren] so I don't like, sacrifice that time – giving my time up. No I just love having them in the day, so I give them my time then. (Gayle, aged 53).

If anything can be regarded as 'typical' of this particular group of grandmothers, it is that all of the women interviewed reported the pleasure and satisfaction they gained from their relationship with their grandchildren. The love they felt *for* their grandchildren was often described as very powerful. This basic and fundamental element of the relationship was the over-riding reason why they were involved in caring for their grandchildren. Speaking about her feelings for her grandchildren Laura said:

*Laura:* I mean the most shocking thing, surprising thing for me was the depth. I mean, I always knew I'd love my grandchildren, but the depth of feeling that I get with the birth of each, and it's not just the first, it's each grandchild. You know, they become an essential part of your life. That to me is the all-consuming thing about becoming a grandmother, that powerful emotion. (Laura, aged 60).

Gill when asked to describe how she felt about her grandchildren said:

*Gill:* Oh proud, proud. And I am proud to take them out. It's just you're full of pride. I mean you enjoy your grandchildren's company. I feel like 'these are our grandchildren'. Showing them off. I used to love to go and pick them up from school and take them out into town. I really love taking them out for the day. I love having them on my own away from their mums. Cos you feel as if, I'm not saying you can't, it's not that you are wanting to do anything different when the mums are there, but it's just lovely to just have them on your own. (Gill, aged 51).

The love they received *from* their grandchildren was equally important. Talking about how she felt then she spent time with her granddaughter Helen said:

*Helen:* Oh, wonderful, Oh yeh, especially when she gets on your knee and arms round your neck 'I love you nana, Oh I love you, I want to live here'. And I say 'Oh right^'. (Helen, aged 54).

## Summary

To sum up, the data clearly shows that being a grandmother is complex and multidimensional. The practice of 'doing' grandmothering on an everyday basis varied from the demanding full-time role of surrogate mother to virtual granny, as in Laura's case discussed in Chapter Four. The family circumstances under which the grandmother/grandchild relationship was experienced also differed from woman to woman. What has become apparent from my data is that individual women share an understanding of what it means to *be* a grandmother, with some common ideas about what an 'ideal' grandmother might do, but that the everyday practices of *doing* grandmothering differ significantly according to particular familial circumstances. The problem for many of the women, as for myself, is how to adapt our understandings of an ideal into the reality of our everyday lives. Social and demographic changes to our society are shaping family situations within which grandmothers respond to the needs of their children. The numbers of younger women with dependent children continues to rise

(Oppenheimer, 1994) and, as my research verifies, adequate and affordable child care remains a problem. As my research also confirms, divorce is a significant factor in influencing the grandmother/grandchild relationship. As writers such as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) state, in late modern society relationships are no longer based on traditional ideas of duty and obligation but on the importance of romantic love and of fulfilling the changing needs of individuals. Young women's expectations of what they want for themselves, and what they require from their partners, have altered considerably from those experienced by their mother's generation. It is said that what now counts as a good marriage is focused on the needs of the individual person, with his or her own choices, ideas and desires rather than the needs of the family as a whole being central. As an individual's needs and expectations change, and more choices become available, so relationships appear to be becoming more fragile and less enduring (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), hence the increase in numbers both divorcing and cohabiting.

In this chapter I have demonstrated that gender and generational position produce a different construction of time for my participants: their lives are experienced in relation to the needs of their families and, being part of a different generation from their children, distanced by time and with added experience, allows different priorities and perspectives to come into play. My participants understand that the most precious gift they can give anyone is their time, underpinned by the idea that time is given with love. A key finding of this study is how my participants' time was used as a 'resource' within familial situations. The findings show that the grandmothers in this study *give* an inordinate amount of their time to the care of their grandchildren. However, the important question for grandmothers is whether their time is given through *choice* or whether it is *expected* of them. These two scenarios produced very different experiences for the grandmothers concerned and will be explored more fully in the following chapter.

# Chapter 6

## Negotiating the Meaning of Grandmotherhood

This chapter aims to examine the respondents' experience of what it means to *be* a grandmother. As feminist researchers maintain, what it is to be a woman, a mother and a grandmother is, for many women, bound up with mothering and caring (Rich, 1977; Lawler, 2000); an 'ethics of care' is more readily associated with women than with men (Rich, 1977; Gilligan, 1982; Ruddick, 1990), and to be an older woman is to suffer the 'double standard' of both ageism and sexism (Sontag, 1978 [1972]). It is the aim of this chapter to make visible some of the participants' shared knowledge of what it means to be a mother, grandmother and an older woman and to discover how this particular knowledge might inform their choices or impose expectations. Gender, generation and cohort bring a different meaning to kinship relations. Understanding what it is to be an older woman and a grandmother is set within the context of the prevailing dominant discourses surrounding gender and ageing. These often taken for granted 'truths' are powerful forces in helping to form women's sense of self and are important factors in influencing how we behave in the world and play an important role in informing what it means to be a grandmother.

However, recognising the diversity of participants' experiences shown in Chapters Four and Five, any common knowledge about what it is to be a woman and a grandmother must be read against a specific biography, time and place and in the context of today's 'post-modern' ideas that we are now the authors of our own biographies and that there is now no 'normal' life pattern to follow. This chapter then sets the groundwork for Chapter Seven, which discusses the construction of an ageing identity as a grandmother.

### **Different cohort: Different experience?**

As the age range of the participants covers forty years, different cohorts will have experienced diverse historical and social conditions; as previous research has shown (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1985) this may produce different understandings of what it means to be a grandmother. Social class, environment, geographical location, family circumstances and their relation to significant others will also have been important factors in their individual biographies. Past experiences will be brought to the present, reflected upon, and thus influence how as individuals they come to know and understand themselves, and therefore act in present situations. In order to illustrate differences of age, generation and cohort I will begin by examining the biographies of three of the grandmothers representing three different age cohorts. Jane, the eldest of the group, was born in 1919, just after the World War I; Doris was born in 1937 experiencing World War II as a child; and Emma, the youngest, was born in 1959. The marked differences in the historical times they were born into and grew up in will in turn have influenced their attitudes and perceptions and, therefore, may influence the experience and practice of being a grandmother.

#### *Jane's Story*

Jane is eighty-two years old. She is a very independent woman who lives alone without help and is separated from her husband who lives abroad. She is deeply religious and places great importance on 'the family' and the church in teaching moral values. Jane was born in Scotland in 1919 just after World War I. Her father had been severely traumatized by his experiences in the trenches and was unable to work for much of his life. Her mother needed her daughters to work, and Jane, as the eldest, was sent to London to be placed into service as a housemaid at the age of thirteen. She spoke of herself as being 'bright' as a young girl and recalled with real resentment not being allowed to complete her grammar school education:

*Jane:* I always did really well at school. I won a scholarship, which was the only reason I could go. But I didn't finish it because I had to go to work. I didn't want to. If I'd been allowed<sup>^</sup> to continue things would have been very different for me I think. I could have got a better job instead of going into service<sup>^</sup> which was a really<sup>^</sup>, poor, terrible kind of work.

She felt that her life would have been completely different if she had been 'allowed' a better education. This factor had influenced her desire for her own daughters to be educated to their full potential. World War II was, as she saw it, her salvation. The point when she recalled her time in the Army was the most animated she became throughout the interview:

*Jane:* I joined the Army and trained as a clerk, well secretary, office worker. I loved<sup>^</sup> every minute of it<sup>^</sup>. A lot of people found the training really hard but I loved it<sup>^</sup>. And then I got to travel and go out to the [...], which I would never have done if it hadn't been for the war.

She traveled widely during this time, eventually becoming a corporal. When Jane spoke about herself she articulated this time as one when she felt that she was 'herself', an individual able to develop her skills. Jane married when she was twenty-eight, had her first child aged twenty-nine, and her youngest child when she was forty. She met her husband while in the Army and he became a self-made successful businessman. Although she was born into a working-class family, if we take her husband's occupation and their material circumstances as a marker of class, she has lived for much of her life as a middle-class wife and mother not having worked outside the home since she married. This does not mean of course that she has not worked, or that she always had a great deal of money at her disposal. Jane spoke about 'having to ask for money' as a wife and 'having to take in visitors' to make ends meet. For many years she took work into the home to help with her daughters' upbringing. Her three daughters became 'well educated' as she put it, and Jane appeared to be proud that they have had opportunities that she was denied:

*Jane:* I wanted better for them [her daughters] because I didn't want them to be dependent and not have anything to fall back on if things didn't work out for them [I think in this context she was referring to their marriages].

She went on to say:

*Jane:* He [her husband] didn't think it was important for the girls to have a good education – I mean, he did want them to go to good schools^ but he didn't think they needed careers – he thought that was a waste as they would get married – he was really^ old fashioned in that way. That wasn't how I^ saw it. I wanted them to have what I hadn't been allowed. (Jane, aged 82).

There is a very strong sense in Jane's words that she had been *denied* an education that she saw as being instrumental in setting the trajectory of her life, and that this was not a life she wanted for her own girls. Jane continued to see her role as one of supporting her daughters. Following the divorce of one of her daughters, she cared for her grandchildren to enable her daughter to complete a professional qualification (see Chapter Five).

### *Emma's Story*

Emma (42) was born into a working-class family in Yorkshire in 1959. Her husband is also working class and left school at sixteen. She constantly spoke about her own mother's 'inadequacies' and her lack of confidence as a young girl and a younger woman. She left school at sixteen with no qualifications and had worked in catering or retailing until the birth of her first child. She described her time at school as 'unhappy', and recalled that she often felt 'left out' and unable to take advantage of her time there. Emma said that she thought that this situation had been repeated with her own daughter, although her daughter had been more rebellious, and had been excluded from school on several occasions. Her teenage daughter, aged fifteen, and grandson now live with her.

A point in Emma's story that appeared to have some significance for her was becoming a member of her local church where she felt she belonged. This had happened around another significant time in her life, the death of her first child. Around this time she began reading and wanting to 'develop' herself. Soon after her second child was born she returned to part-time catering work. She said that she 'had tried very hard to give her own child a better start in life than she had experienced'. However, she referred to herself as an 'inadequate mother' wanting to learn more about 'nurturing' and 'self development', both for her own and her daughter's sake. However, reflecting on her childhood, she felt that she had not been 'properly nurtured' herself and therefore had not known how to mother her own daughter. She also said that she had not been 'mature enough' when she became a mother to care for a child.

The notion of being a 'good mother' was something that Emma spoke about at length. Her own perceived failure as a mother, at this stage in her life, was clearly of immense importance to her view of herself. She had recently begun to retrain in education in a job which was in accord with her wish to learn more about child development, and which was also giving her a recognised role outside the family and raising her feelings of self-worth:

*Emma:* You know, realising that I can learn has made a difference. And I think it is a good example to set for Kyle too – you know that even nana<sup>^</sup> can learn at school.

Emma had taken on responsibility for her daughter and her grandson in order to try to stop what she saw as a cycle of poor mothering.

Speaking about her own mother Emma said:

*Emma:* It's a very strange set of circumstances that my mum was brought up in, because her own mother kind of left them, and went and had a second<sup>^</sup> family, then brought the second family back into the first family, and they kind of, like, I suppose it was a fractured<sup>^</sup> family really. I think my mum had a lot of resentment<sup>^</sup> towards my grandma. So she probably didn't have a very strong



sense of love and value for herself, so how can she give a sense of value and a feeling of nurturing and loving when she didn't have it herself<sup>^</sup>. You know, so probably I've been able to analyse that, and probably been able to cos of the church, I was probably very disappointed and felt resentful<sup>^</sup> at one stage but that's kind of, like worked its way through as well.

Emma had clearly taken a very keen interest in child development and appeared to have made a decision to learn the skills of mothering and give her grandson, as she put it, the 'right attributes' to be a successful, well adjusted adult. At the age of forty-two, Emma is still thinking very much in terms of how she can effect change, both in her own life and also in her family. Being a younger woman she is more able to take up opportunities for re-training and to think of these as being appropriate for her.

These two women spoke in very different ways about their lives. Jane gave a very factual account revealing very little about herself and her feelings. Emma was more open and used a discourse similar to that of self-help literature, reflecting about 'dealing with issues' and 'self-development'. Emma had reached a point in her life where she felt that she had come to understand much more about herself and her past and was making plans for the future to develop herself further. She spoke a good deal about how she envisaged the future, whereas Jane spoke about her past achievements and her part in providing better opportunities for her own children. The difference in their ages, Jane at eighty-four, nearing the end of her life, and Emma at forty-two, in the middle years, might account for some of these differences. Emma had much of her life still before her, while Jane, with more of her life behind her, reflected on her past. For Jane the interview was probably an opportunity for reminiscence and a kind of 'life review' (Butler, 1975; Coleman, 1986) for thinking about the part she had played in influencing her family. However, these differences could also be a reflection of the ways in which people now talk about themselves. It is

the changes in the ways in which the individual is now said to be understood, that is, 'the self as project', as could be said to be Emma's understanding, rather than traditional notions of the 'general good of the family', as in Jane's case, that may be evident in these stories. These ideas will be discussed further in Chapter Seven. Cultural changes now mean that personal problems are now reflected upon and spoken about openly, whereas in Jane's formative years, and from her Scottish, Presbyterian, working-class background, speaking about feelings and private family affairs was perhaps not considered the 'proper' thing to do.

### *Doris' Story*

Doris (63), as a representative of an age cohort in between Jane and Emma, became a grandmother at the age of forty-five at a time when many more women were working outside the home, and she had hoped to take this opportunity for herself. However, the birth of grandchildren and the needs of her daughters to work as well as bring up their children placed Doris back in the caring role, meeting the needs of kin, offering her little opportunity to develop an identity outside of the family and the home. Doris's childhood was experienced during World War II. She was brought up in a working-class household in South Yorkshire. Her mother died when she was seven years old and she was raised partly by her grandmother, and partly by her step-mother. She was the eldest girl of six children and was often responsible for looking after her younger siblings. Doris was sent into service shortly before her sixteenth birthday, into a large country house some distance from her home. She had never been away from home before and found the initial experience a huge shock. As was quite common for young women at this time, she had not been involved in the decision about what kind of work she would do. This was something that had been decided for her. Doris remembered:

*Doris:* And that was my stepmother's idea. She thought it would set me up for my life. It actually has done as well. So you see she was right there (laughs). My sister had to be a baker. Which sort of sets her up for life, and she, she now, she doesn't work full time, but she still makes wedding cakes. [.....] At first I thought it was a really horrible job for me to have to do. Ummm, but then you know, they called us all housemaids, and they were all the same and they all thought it was a horrible job for them to have to do. But then you build up this comradeship don't you? And it was us and them – and it turned out it was alright – I was there quite a long time – you worked your way up from being a little one a bit further up and then new little ones come in and so on.

Doris had wanted to train as a chiropodist but had not been allowed to do so as it was not deemed appropriate for a girl:

*Doris:* Yes, I would have had to train – whereas the boys had training – they all had apprenticeships – but I suppose we did in a way – I mean May went to the bakers, and she went on to learn to bake bread and pastries and cakes - and she does lovely<sup>^</sup> wedding cakes now – of course they are more fashionable now - everybody has a special cake for any excuse now don't they? So really she keeps quite busy with that – whereas all I<sup>^</sup> learnt to do was clean house. And I've always had it – so really it did stand me in good stead.

Gender, class and cultural and historically specific norms are evident in these stories, for Doris and Jane, the importance to them of not being involved in the decision making process about their education or their employment were clear; and for Emma social class and her particular family relations had limited her educational opportunities. Reflecting on their experiences, it appears that they all felt that both their gender and social class had meant that they had not been able to fulfill their potential, either in education or employment. The social, economic and cultural factors of the time had restricted their education and thus their employment opportunities right up to the present time.

Different cohorts, then, have very different attitudes and expectations. In talking about the difference in her own children leaving school and going to work Doris had this to say:

*Doris:* Oh they were definitely different. I mean it didn't matter how hard we persuaded them one way or the other, if that wasn't what they wanted, they wouldn't do it.

Doris went on to talk about the differences in marriage now and in her day:

*Doris:* I didn't carry on working, I think it was a case of, 'you've got to look after the house', although we only had rooms not a house, we just had rooms, and I would be at home.

Int: Was that expected?

*Doris:* It was expected yes<sup>^</sup>, Jack would be the breadwinner, he would go to work, and I would do the shopping and the chores and housework, it was no different for me cos I had always<sup>^</sup> done that (laughs).

Her own daughters all had careers. All had continued working after they were married and all had returned to full-time work after they had children. Doris had been a major factor in enabling them to do this. Doris remained married to her husband until his death in 2002, whereas two of her daughters are divorced. As Walby (1997) argues, age and cohort differences make crucial differences to an individual's ability to take advantage of new social relations and more equal educational and work opportunities of today:

Younger women have benefited from the changes; older women have not. Since formal education is usually completed early in life the transformation of women's educational opportunities has passed older women by. This creates two gendered patterns of inequality. First, there is a gap between younger women and older women in qualifications. This has implications for the employment opportunities, opening a gap in this as well as other arenas. Second, it means that there are different patterns of gender relations and gender inequality among younger and older women. Older women face much greater inequality in their dealings with their male peers than for younger women as a result of these different educational opportunities and achievements (Walby, 1997:49).

However, although educational and employment opportunities and attitudes to divorce have become more equal for women since Jane and Doris's time, possibly creating a window of opportunity for Emma, what was outstanding was the enduring centrality of the family in all of the participants' lives reflecting what appears to continue to be a prescribed gender role. Doris, along with many of the other grandmothers in this study, has spent most of her life caring for others and finds it very difficult to refuse to give help if it is asked of her. For most of the women living life in relation to the needs of others is what they do. It could be argued that caring for and about others is central to their identity. All of the women in this study have invested heavily in their role as mothers and grandmothers. In almost every case their family was quoted as being the most important aspect of their lives. Angela's response to the question 'what does her family *mean* to her' was fairly typical:

*Angela:* I should say everything really, but then it does<sup>^</sup>, I mean, because I think your life is your family – And we like to do things together. We like time as husband and wife together, but we like to be a family, you know, like the children and the grandchildren and we like to make things happen – I mean at Easter they'll probably be a houseful for a couple of days, but that's part of it because we are all family orientated, we like to help each other. (Angela, aged 52).

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how the centrality of family life translates into an understanding of being a grandmother. In order to understand further what it means to be a grandmother, I propose that it is first necessary to identify the discourses surrounding motherhood as the foundations on which much of gender identity is, or was in the case of older women's lives, constructed. I propose that how the participants have come to understand motherhood is central to how, as older women, they negotiate their way through the process of coming to *be* a grandmother.

## **Gender, love and caring**

The dominant discourses that prevail in society at any given point in time are influential in how gender identities are constructed and taken up. Discourses are not distinct from practices and are important in helping to understand the ways in which we act in the world. As Foucault argues, discourses are not only linguistic representations, they produce meaning and create categories, they should be read as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1992 [1976]:48-49), and it is these meanings that articulate with social practices and therefore play a part in structuring our lives and influencing gender relations. Discourses become 'epistemological enforcers' (Said, 1991:10) of what we can and can't do; what we desire and hope for; how we wish to be seen and how we see ourselves. 'The argument is not that words determine but that those practices which constitute our everyday lives are produced and reproduced as an integral part of the production of signs and signifying systems' (Henriques et al., 1984:99). It is the link between such 'epistemological enforcers' of a recognised knowledge base, often seen as a 'truth', and the power that this holds to enforce certain standards or accepted norms by which people are judged and judge themselves that is important.

Social behaviour and attitudes become gendered in the individual to fit in with socially acceptable forms of expression. As Biggs (1993) argues in relation to ageing, 'This is not only true of gender, but for any potential in the psyche that is subject to social sanction. Roles are 'gerontized' as much as they are gendered'(Biggs, 1993:21). Behaviour that is in breach of what is regarded as appropriate for a particular age and or gender, or is simply different to that of age-peers, 'would then be classified as deviant and be disqualified as an example of 'type' alone.'(Biggs, 1993:25). Standing alone outside the dominant norms and values of society can be a desolate place to be.

*Motherhood: the 'natural' embodiment of caring*

A major part of what any individual woman has to negotiate and make sense of is the deeply gendered structure of social life. Probably the most significant discourse within which women are situated is that which places them in the role of carers, both in the private and the public sphere. A mother is seen as the 'natural' embodiment of this discourse (Phoenix et al., 1991). I propose that grandmothers are perceived as possessing *double* portions of this caring nature as still being mothers they now have a second generation to care for.

Understanding the meaning of caring for older women is particularly important because as women in their middle years they may be expected to provide *triple* levels of caring as they may also be required to care for their own parents' generation (Phillips 2000).

Within the discourse of motherhood, becoming a mother is seen as the major route to an adult female identity providing physical and emotional fulfillment. Motherhood is regarded as 'essential' or at least 'desirable' for all women (Ussher, 1990). One of the aims of this research is to make visible the ways in which the grandmothers negotiate these 'constructed' notions of what it is to be female within the context of their everyday lives. Negotiating these prescriptive ideas of female identity arguably has a major impact on how they experience their lives, what is expected of them, and how they come to terms with being a grandmother. This in turn influences what they *do* in everyday practice.

The major questions to unravel here are whether women are indeed giving this labour freely, that is as 'a labour of love' worthy of being considered as separate and unique in relation to other kinds of work, or whether they are in effect having this labour extracted from them through the emotionalisation of caring and housework and the fear of the social penalties leveled at women who do not 'care'. Is 'caring' therefore compulsory for women if they want to be accepted in society,

a form of oppression? Or is caring a reciprocal relation, given gladly, and experienced as empowering? Or are the two necessarily mutually exclusive?

The relationship between gender, love and caring is central to any understanding of what it means to *be* a grandmother. The concept of love and both caring for and about others have been cited as integral to the construction of female identity (Noddings, 1984; Abel and Nelson, 1990; Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson, 2001). For the women in this study the everyday experience of *doing* grandmothering involves a great deal of 'caring for and caring about' their grandchildren and other family members. Why they are prepared to do this and how they understand whether or not this is part of what it means to be a grandmother needs to be theorized against the background of what they actually do in their everyday lives.

### *The capacity to care*

What has been described as 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) has been adopted in relation to paid employment such as in the case of air stewardesses (ibid 1983) or nurses (James, 1989). Here the management of one's own emotions in providing care for others represents a key feature of what women are *expected* to be capable of, thus making them *suitable* for particular kinds of employment. As Morgan argues, 'Paid emotional labour is gendered in that women tend to be found doing it more frequently than men and that, more profoundly, it is equated with common-sensical notions of femininity' (Morgan, 1996:105). This emotional work is an integral part of the work that the grandmothers do within their family situations:

What the woman gives in this work is emotion as much as any kind of physical labour, while she is also *supposed* to be able to handle the emotions and tensions on the part of the cared for both individually and in relation to other members of the family. Thus, to give a simple



example, caring for a sick child involves all the following: physical care and monitoring, handling the fears and frustration experienced by the sick child, handling the adjustments required on behalf of other members of the family who may be resentful of the attention being accorded to the sick child, and drawing upon one's own emotional resources and exercising emotional control while doing all of this. Even this very simple example can highlight some of the complexities of emotional labour when it is applied to work in the home [my italics] (Morgan, 1996:105).

The social expectation that women are willing and able to provide 'emotion work' permeates all levels of society and, for the most part, goes unquestioned. My respondents' reported experiences would appear to show that they have internalised the notion of caring for and about others as part of their female identity. They spoke about gender differences in that men were often found to be lacking when it came to recognising and understanding the needs of others. Irene talked about how she thought that a 'granddad isn't the same as a grandma' in that grandchildren stand to gain more from a grandma than a granddad. She spoke about her own involvement with her grandchildren and how this differs from her husband's:

*Irene:* I mean you don't think about why you do it, you just sort of do it. I mean Ron gets annoyed with me because I spend a lot of time there and he gets frustrated. But that's a fella and they are different, they think different. He doesn't – they don't think like a woman thinks. Ron's ace with them, I have to say he is brilliant. He'll take them out and build snowmen on the street and things like that. But would he do it if I wasn't there? Sometimes I think that men can only think of one thing at once, no disrespect to them, but er, certainly, yeh, he loves them and he takes them out, but I don't think they think like women. I really don't. In no matter what, whether it's their own children, grandchildren or who it is. ... Certainly my own dad with my children, I mean, yeh, they had a granddad but they never saw him. (Irene, aged 53).

Irene appears to be speaking here about women having a *capacity to care* that occurs at a subconscious level 'you don't think about it you

just do it'; or that there is an innate difference between men and women in that men 'don't think like a woman thinks'. It could be argued that her learned responses to the needs of others have become so ingrained as to become embodied dispositions in the sense that her reactions have become almost reflex actions, rather than considered actions, what Bourdieu (1977) terms 'habitus'. Caring for others was something that many of the women understood as 'natural' or 'instinctual'; it appeared to be unquestioned and to be experienced at a subconscious level.

There seemed to be a general consensus of opinion in respect of a capacity to love and care for children. Irene spoke about her love of children as 'a genuine love for bairns'. Maureen spoke about her love for babies:

*Maureen:* I just – well, when they are first born they are so, they are dependent on you for everything you know, they can't do anything you have got to do everything, and I absolutely love it, I can't have enough of them you know [laughs] doing everything for them and looking after them. (Maureen, aged 65).

There is, however a difference between what is generally understood as 'natural' capacity to care, which is seen as innate, and 'ethical' caring as being more open to specifically cultural or ideological norms and values about perceived duty and obligation. However, that is not to say that these understandings do not call upon cultural images or beliefs derived from ideas of natural caring. If the women concerned were caring purely on an instinctual level this would appear to negate any level of choice. As discussed in Chapter Five, those grandmothers who had taken on the primary care of their grandchildren indicated that they felt that they did not have a choice, it was just something that 'had to be done'. In these situations there were elements of what was described as something that a good mother/grandmother would 'naturally' do, and elements of feeling 'obliged' to take on this role, the 'had to' referring to cultural expectations of families being responsible for the well-being of their kin. However, when asked if they helped their children or

grandchildren out of duty or choice the majority said that this was out of choice. Irene responded in this way:

*Irene:* Oh yes out of choice definitely, out of choice.

Int: You don't feel as though you are obliged to in any way?

*Irene:* No, she doesn't work. So I'm not obliged to go round babysitting. I do flexi-hours so maybe I've made myself available for that sort of relationship. But no, I go because I want to go.

Asked how she would feel if she was expected to help she said:

*Irene:* I wouldn't like it no. I've got my life to lead and she's got hers and I wouldn't like it if I was expected to do this, that and the other. (Irene, aged 53).

An element of the ideal model of grandmothering (see Chapter Five Table 7) was that the grandmother has choice in how and when she becomes involved; for those who felt they had not been given a choice their experience was less satisfactory. Doris spoke about her annoyance of sometimes being 'dumped on' without notice:

*Doris:* I feel that I do things that I should<sup>^</sup> do – and I do the things that I don't want to do sometimes.

Int: Right, so can you tell me a little bit about what you don't want to or would rather not do then?

*Doris:* Well, I would rather not have them dumped<sup>^</sup> on me without notice. Which happens quite a lot<sup>^</sup>. It sounds awful 'being dumped on' doesn't it<sup>^</sup> ... they will be four or five hours later than you expected ...

Int: So you feel a bit taken for granted?

*Doris:* That's it, you do feel taken for granted.

Int: Do you feel that you have choice in the matter when it comes to looking after the grandchildren?

*Doris:* Not often, not always, no. But if I've had to say no I feel bad because I've said no – and yet it's beyond my control usually. It's usually something I've planned and I can't get out of it – or don't want to<sup>^</sup>.

However, when asked how she felt about *being* a grandmother Doris said:

*Doris:* Oh I think it's lovely. I love it. I loved it more when they were little. I like it now really, and I suppose in a few years, perhaps four or five years time, we shall still see them and they will come to us.

Doris's first statement of feeling 'dumped on' appears to contradict her earlier account in the interview where she describes being a grandmother as 'lovely' and 'a chance still to be needed'. This apparent ambivalence of feeling could be explained by Doris's very clear need for her role as grand/mother to be acknowledged by her family. Her life story reveals that her family is what she has built her understanding of her self around. Doris feels guilty if she refuses help, leading to a situation where she often 'has them when she doesn't want them' because she is afraid of 'not being asked again' and therefore losing what she identifies as most important in her life, her family. Doris's sense of self is clearly bound up with her role in the family as wife, mother and grandmother.

As Morgan argues, caring as an experience is something which may result in the individuals concerned being 'increasingly faced with competing and contradictory currents' (Morgan, 1996:107). 'To be engaged in caring may be seen as empowering, disrupting, may be compartmentalized as only one part of life or combined with a career in a variety of ways depending on the circumstances of the individual concerned' (ibid 1996:102). There are conflicting views taken on caring as a part of women's lives. Caring situations are fluid and diverse not always oppressive nor at all times experienced as a sacrifice or a burden. Caring can be experienced as rewarding and has a reciprocal nature. Caring is not necessarily a one-way process.

### *Reciprocity*

The notion of interdependence and reciprocity is an important consideration here. At times, some of the women found it difficult to decide whether they were doing the caring for the benefit of their own children, for their grandchildren or for themselves. Helen when asked who she felt she was helping most in caring for her grandchild made this point quite clearly:

*Helen:* Well I'm helping her (daughter), but I'm also helping Lizzy (granddaughter) as well, ....and myself I think.

Feeling needed and part of the family is something that was reported in most of the women's stories. The well-being and continuity of the family was of paramount importance. What they were doing was for the family as a whole. It was experienced as a reciprocal relationship with the grandmother often reporting receiving as much from the relationship as she was giving. As discussed in Chapter Four, for those women who were alone through being widowed such as Betty, the relationship with their grandchildren took on an added dimension<sup>34</sup>: their enthusiasm for life she described as 'infectious', giving her an alternative outlook:

*Betty:* Well, I think it's closeness<sup>^</sup>. I think it's family, being part of something. ....You know you have got somebody that loves you. (Betty, aged 69).

The idea of reciprocity within the relationship, in that the love given is also received, features in all the women's stories. Laura, when talking about what it is that her grandchildren give her, said:

*Laura:* [They give me] a lot of love, and a lot of joy and pleasure er.... And truth<sup>^</sup>, they see you as you are. I think that's the main thing. Just the sheer joy of them being there and the love that they give you. (Laura, aged 60).

The relaxed nature of the relationship and the give and take between the two generations featured in several of the women's stories. Betty

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<sup>34</sup> Doris was widowed following the interviews and invited me to the funeral where it was clearly evident that her grandchildren were providing a great deal of support on both a practical and an emotional level.

said:

*Betty:* I'm using them as much as they're using me. That's the top and bottom of it isn't it (laughs). That doesn't sound nice I know.

Int: It's a reciprocal thing. You getting as much as you give.

*Betty:* Yes that's it, and I think you feel wanted<sup>^</sup>, that's another thing you know. They do need<sup>^</sup> you, even if it's only for a short time a day. In fact the days that I'm poorly in bed, that takes me back to my days as well [she is referring here to her looking after her own mother when she was ill]. I didn't tell Sheila the other day that I wasn't feeling very well<sup>></sup>, I thought well, I'll be over it by the time they get here. She said 'Shall I take them home?' but I said 'No, No'. They have their breakfasts and they're round here about nineish, and straight away, bum, bum, bum up the stairs, all three of them charging up, 'Aren't you well today grandma?' (laughs). They are really old fashioned you know. They see me sit nursing a hot water bottle, but that's.... (laughs) oh dear, (Betty, aged 69).

### **Grandmotherhood experienced as a continuation of motherhood**

The notion of the relationship being a two-way process in which the women felt that they got as much as they gave linked with the idea of feeling needed and reconnected to the family. For a number of the women the arrival of grandchildren gave them a legitimate and socially sanctioned way of becoming part of their own children's lives again. The link that grandchildren provided with their children, and the welcome feeling of being needed, came up in the conversations many times. Before the arrival of grandchildren some had felt distanced from their children once they had left home and found partners. Becoming a grandmother for many of the women brought them closer to their daughters again.

### *Connected Lives*

The relationship between mothers and daughters is one that has been theorised in many ways, however, Biggs (1993) in discussing

Woodward's (1991) theoretical position that argues for a generational identity extending into later life, explains this as being based on the notion of mother and daughter sameness causing problems of differentiation, that is the problem of establishing clear boundaries between one and other being more difficult that it is with a male child. One consequence of which is that the girl child's development is centred more on the triangle of mother-daughter-baby than on the gender based and oedipal triangle of mother-child-father. Their similarity of experience creates a basis for generational identity:

If generational identity is established in little girls before gender identity as sexual difference ...and if little girls experience sameness or similarity in the mirroring relation to the mother, then we can see how generational continuity – the identity of generations over time – stems from generational identity (Woodward, 1991:99).

However, even without using psychoanalysis, it is possible to see the connectedness and embeddedness of mothers and daughters in families. For many of the women the relationship between the mother and daughter is one in which the mother sees her past self in the daughter and identifies with her struggles, particularly in childcare, and the hoped for scenario is that the daughter sees herself in the mother recognising her mother's contribution and sacrifices made for 'the family'.

Some of the grandmothers reported benefiting from this level of interdependence in that they enjoyed the connection and contributing to the success of yet another generation. Yet for others the experience can be one of difference, disruption and conflict. Doris's disagreement with her daughter over her partner's treatment of her grandson resulted in a strained relationship that was the cause of a great deal of distress. Talking about her family she said:

*Doris:* I think we are quite close really, except of course Sandra, the eldest one, we had a disruption a few years ago, it would be about five years now actually, where she had been divorced, and then she met this new partner we thoroughly disapproved of, and

that's basically what caused the rift. And that's not going to right itself, you can't see any solution to it at all, but I still see all of the grandchildren, still see Sandra if it comes to it, she just doesn't talk to me.

Int: Do you find that hard?

*Doris:* Oh yeah. Yes. Like a stab in the heart....Since we've not had this communication with Sandra – it spoils every celebration – because it happened before Pete retired so he wouldn't have a retirement do because Sandra wouldn't be there – he wouldn't have a birthday – we had the fortieth wedding anniversary and we didn't have a celebration because it wasn't going to be a whole family....yes it has spoilt like the wholeness of it – if somebody dies you know they are not going to come don't you – but every day you think, 'Well perhaps tomorrow!'[...] Perhaps tomorrow she'll ring up or perhaps one of the kids will ring up for her.....It wouldn't matter who did it would it? [At this point in the interview Doris became upset. The interview was interrupted while she regained her composure and the subject changed].

Doris' words reflect those of many of the other women, their family is the centre of her world and being regarded as a good mother and grandmother is vitally important to her sense of self:

*Doris:* I don't know what I would do without my family – I really don't – I can't – I can't visualise not having a family'. (Doris, aged 63).

She 'loved' being a grandmother and 'feeling needed' and felt that she had a 'strong place' in the family. The problem relationship with her daughter engendered feelings of her family being incomplete. Doris saw her position as a good mother as being pivotal to her sense of self, it was 'her family', and so, as she said, her daughter's actions were felt as a rejection, like a 'stab in the heart'.

### *Completing the parenting experience*

Becoming grandparents was something that for many of the respondents was something they had considered for some time. Connie remembered a conversation while walking on the beach with her husband and thinking about the possibility of becoming grandparents:



*Connie:* You know, just think, or can you imagine us walking along the beach, you know in a few years time, do you think we'll have any grandchildren - and we couldn't visualise it then really and then all of a sudden it sort of happened and err ...I was over the moon. (Connie, aged 56).

Becoming a grandmother for the women in this study appears to be something that was imagined at a certain point in the life course, not necessarily the same point for all, but certainly as a life event, it was anticipated and looked forward to. Becoming a grandparent was seen as almost a way of *completing* the parental experience. Helen remembered talking to her husband at her daughter's wedding and her husband saying:

*Helen:* There's only one thing I want when I'm fifty from Jenny [his daughter] and he didn't say anything else, that was it, but everybody knew what he meant ...and actually she was born just before Tom was fifty, so he was really pleased about that, we all were. We were really...we were all over the moon. (Helen, aged 54).

There is a very strong element of a notion of continuity of the self through the next generation emerging from stories such as Helen's, one that resonates through many of the other grandmother's words. I recorded my own response to the birth of my first grandchild as follows:

Seeing him for the first time was truly amazing – I welled up with emotion – he had obviously been quite traumatised by the birth – I felt so protective towards him and so much love that I was quite overwhelmed – it reconnected with my feelings when his father was born - holding him and talking to him was just like holding one of my own. My family had suddenly grown by another generation and would continue to grow through him.

The bond that develops between grandmothers and their grandchildren is firmly embedded in their previous experience of motherhood. Continuity and connectivity between and through generations has emerged as a significant experience of being a grandmother for the participants in this study. Experiencing grandmothering as a continuation of mothering was a one theme, and continuity in the sense

of immortality or generativity, that is, the grandmother passing on her experience and so continuing through her grandchildren was another. The first to be discussed here is the notion of mothering and grandmothering as a continuum developing into another level of mothering. As discussed in Chapter Five, grandmothers whose daughters are teenage mothers can be experience grandmothering as 'double mothering'; however, grandmothering generally is in a very real sense mothering in double measure. Grandmothers will in most cases continue to be mothers, locating them in a third generation, a position that has the potential to connect them to the needs of two interlinked generations. Understanding being a grandmother in this way reveals a sense of continuity of the self throughout the life course (De Beauvoir, 1972).

Becoming a grandmother was reported by many of the participants to be a 'natural' progression from being a mother, something that was expected. Laura stated that being a grandmother to her is:

*Laura:* ...continuous, all the time, part of my life ....it's an essential part of me now you know, that is me. A wife, mother and grandmother it's all part of me. (Laura, aged 60).

In discussing what it means to them to be grandmothers, my findings are that *being* a grandmother is anticipated with pleasure and seen as simply a 'natural progression' from, or a continuation of mothering. Being a grandmother experienced as a *continuum* along which a further level of mothering is achieved. Laura expresses this thought as follows:

*Laura:* I had no problems becoming a grandmother that's a progression.....I've never had any grandmothers to, you know people learn to mother from their mothers, I've never had that, but my mother was a very caring person and she, I mean, yes, I was nineteen when she died, but she had stuff in her storage cupboard planning for when she was a grandmother. You know she had cots and highchairs and things that she'd kept from us being children that she kept for her grandchildren. So I've been brought up in this sort of ethos where you become a

grandmother, but, well no, I think being a grandmother has just continued on from mothering. I think it's just a development on from that. (Laura, aged 60).

### *Second chance*

Learning to love and care for others, acquiring a kind of 'caring capital' as discussed in Chapter Five, had been a major part of their lives. Becoming grandmothers could be seen as an opportunity to continue to use their acquired knowledge, perhaps, investing in giving care in the present in the hope of benefiting by receiving love, and perhaps care, in the future. The idea that being a grandmother is experienced as a 'second chance' to be better 'mothers' to their grandchildren than they were to their own children, was expressed by many of the women. Gill said:

*Gill:* I'd love to go back in time and have mine again and I'd do things different. I would love to do it again and I'd do it different and I know a lot of people who'd do that because we've talked about it, yes<sup>^</sup>. I would make more time, whereas you didn't with your own and...I would do that. (Gill, aged 51).

For some this 'second chance' gave them the opportunity to put into practice what they felt they had learned from their mistakes as mothers. Betty said:

*Betty:* It's like having your own children back again I think. You get a second chance. (Betty, aged 69).

Doris explained how she felt:

*Doris:* I think it has something really to do with your own children. It's like you've got a second chance <sup>^</sup>...I think that when you have your children, like mine were three quite close together>, you didn't really have time...I didn't give it any thought beforehand, and I don't think I gave it any thought after<sup>^</sup> if it came to that, but looking back, I think to myself that I didn't have time for them. (Doris, aged 63).

### *The same but different*

The experience of what it means to *be* a grandmother appears to mirror being a mother but also has its differences. Helen tried to explain her understanding of 'grandmother love' and how it was different from 'mother love':

*Helen:* I don't know it's a funny feeling it's, when you see your own children as soon as they're born, I mean you love them straightaway. But your grandchildren, it's, it's not that you love them more but it's a different, ....you do love them more. Unless it's because you can't remember what you really felt like when you had your own. But, oh, it was lovely; it was lovely to see her just laid in her cot [her emphasis].

*Int:* When you say you love them more in what way do you mean that?

*Helen:* Well, I don't....not really more, it's a different sort of love. You can't really explain it, erm.....I mean you do love your own children but when you see your grandchildren and you know that they've come from your own children, it's sort of different, different feeling altogether. I don't know whether you felt the same with Ben?

*Int:* I did, yes. It's that emotion that sticks in your memory.

*Helen:* I think so, probably that your child has given you something really, really special isn't it.

*Int:* Really precious, it's a kind of gift.

*Helen:* Yes, that's what it is.

*Int:* Were you surprised about how you felt?

*Helen:* Oh yes, yes. Well I knew I would love her and that we'd been looking forward to having her, but when you see her you just can't describe really just how you feel. (Helen, aged 54).

Laura remembered her feelings of surprise when her first grandchild was born:

*Laura:* [I was] completely overwhelmed. Emotion that I'd never anticipated. Err.....in some ways it was more overwhelming than the birth of my own children. (Laura, aged 60).

Mary also reported her feelings for her grandchildren as being 'more' and different from those she experienced with her own children:

*Mary:* I think you feel more for your grandchildren. I mean I was

absolutely over the moon<sup>^</sup> when I had my own but, with a grandchild it's just different. I think you just, you had your own and you knew what they were like, but somehow you just didn't seem to have as much time with them and, you know, you just, oh, do more with them, because you put your work aside just to be with them. I do. I can stop my work anytime, [both laugh] especially when they were little, when there was more to do for them. I mean when he was born I did, I just did everything for him right from him being born. His mum wasn't very well and err, I just had him such a lot. In fact she wasn't really bothered about having him. (Mary, aged 51).

Some described grandmothering as simply extending the period of mothering into 'another level' of mothering. Gill spoke about her experience of being a grandmother as feeling like being a second mum:

*Gill:* I think that's how you feel, like another mum really. You feel like it's yours and you're bringing them up all again. It's a lovely feeling. (Gill, aged 51).

Others described grandmothering as giving more pleasure than mothering. Helen felt that being a grandmother is a more relaxed experience than mothering and that with age comes more patience:

*Helen:* Actually when you get that bit older you've more patience as well I think, than you did with your own children. You had to do more things, well you work don't you, cooking and cleaning and this and that, and maybe going out. But when you've got your grandchild everything's done and you've got what you want so you don't have to go out to work so you can enjoy them. (Helen, aged 54).

Laura (60) summed up what she understood to be the difference between the experience of being a grandmother and a mother:

*Laura:* When a child comes into a room they look for a reaction subconsciously and grandparent's faces tend to light up with delight and parents are full of 'you haven't brushed your hair or cleaned your teeth. Have you tidied up your room'. So there's a completely different attitude, so that when you see the children, what they receive from you is something completely different and I think you're unaware of it to a certain extent, but I think that's what makes your relationship different. Like I say, you don't have the pressures that parents have. So the pressures have gone, you've lost the pressure but you have the delight of the children.

You have more time to spend with them and less of the anxieties about everything involved with family life really. And also you get it in short bursts, I mean, you only see them, unless you actually care for them, but I only see them in short bursts so there's none of the pressures there which makes it a lot better. You have less baggage, you have the maturity and the realisation that the things that you worried about and were anxious about when your children were young aren't as important as you believed them to be.

Many of the women recounted the pressures and anxieties of being a mother of 'getting it right'. This illustrates well the ways in which women are constantly reflecting on their performance as mothers and judging themselves against current dominant discourses of motherhood and the expected pleasures of a 'good' mother/child relationship. All of the women described the grandmother/grandchild as a 'special' kind of relationship. Laura described this 'special relationship' as almost being like a 'second childhood' for the grandmother:

*Laura:* You get different things from them and they sometimes tend to treat you almost like, almost like another child in a way. Because there is a different attitude they have towards you. It's almost like your second childhood in a way because they treat you completely different to the way in which they treat their parents, which is quite interesting. (Laura, aged 60).

Being able to relate to grandchildren as a 'friend' and 'companion' was something that occurred in many of the women's stories. The experience of being with grandchildren as helping grandmothers to 'feel young' and 'keep active' was something that was reported. Gill, Laura, Doris, Angela, Betty and Helen all spoke about how being involved with their grandchildren kept them active and more in touch with the younger generation. Helen explained how being involved with her grandchild made her feel:

*Helen:* Well, I think they keep you feeling a bit younger actually when you think your own children have got to, well John is eighteen in September and you're thinking gosh, eighteen, and then you remember how old you are getting. (Both laugh). No, I think they do actually keep you feeling younger.....and I feel appreciated. (Helen, aged 54).

Contrary to being a grandmother making them feel old, as might be expected from cultural representations of grandmothers, these grandmothers felt younger, sometimes despite health problems as in Betty and Angela's cases, and benefited from the contact they had with their grandchildren.

### **Continuity of the grandmother through the family**

Research has found that being a grandmother provides feelings of continuity and immortality through the grandmother's input into the life of her children and grandchildren (Crawford, 1981; Kornhaber, 1996). Grandmotherhood, then, links backwards in time to motherhood and further back to their own childhood, and projects forwards in time through the mother/child and grandmother/grandchild relationship. One of the recognised ideal qualities of grandmothers is that of kin-keepers and the holders of family stories and history (see Chapter 5, Table 7) and family photographs (see Chapter 3, Illustration 3) a factor born out in other research findings looking at the role of grandmothers (Troll, 1983; Hagestad, 1985); another is that of being a valued elder and a resource of knowledge for the grandchild (Kivnick, 1980). For many of the women in this study their sense of being the keepers of family history was clear. The fascination with old photographs, family films, recounting family deeds and recognising family traits was very strong. The notion of wishing to pass on family stories to the next generation was a feature of many of the women's stories. Helen when asked if she kept a record of family events:

*Helen:* Oh yes of course. Yes. I've got hundreds<sup>^</sup> of photographs albums and different things and diaries.

*Int:* Is your granddaughter aware of that?

*Helen:* Oh, she knows where all the photograph albums are yes.

*Int:* Does she ask you tell her stories about family things?

*Helen:* Oh, yes, when she stays here at night and when she goes to bed she'll say 'will you tell me one of your stories. I don't want a story out of a book, I want one of your stories.' So I have to tell

her about what's happened maybe when Sue was a baby, that's her auntie Sue, or when Joan got married, or when my brother lost his arm.....She remembers once you've told her, she remembers and she'll say 'Will you tell me about so and so again'.

Grandmothers were also used as sources of local or national history. Helen spoke about how she helped her granddaughter with a school project on the Second World War.

*Helen:* She came home and she said 'Will you go up in the loft,' cos she knows there's all sorts in our loft, some really old things, 'and bring down some things from the olden days'. (Helen, aged 54).

Imparting historical facts to their grandchildren was something that grandfathers seemed to do. Mary spoke about her husband's role in teaching her grandchildren about the history of the fishing community of which they were a part:

*Mary:* The two eldest was very interested in history, especially Jack. Cos their granddad likes history ....he gets them sat with him and tells them all about different things from way gone times, way back.

*Int:* I suppose being part of the fishing community as well, there's a huge history.

*Mary:* He has lots of tales to tell of that. He's got diaries. He fills them in every day and has done for years. Jack had them all out last week actually, going through his diaries of different catches they'd had, and he had Sally counting up how much fish they'd had over this time and that. (Mary, aged 61).

The stories they tell to their grandchildren appear to reaffirm their sense of self, but importantly this also allows them to reflect upon their lives and the lives of others, and hopefully influence future generations to make more informed choices. The stories we tell about our selves, to our selves, also affect how we see our selves in the world. The use of life-review and reminiscence has been recommended as a form of intervention with older people as a means of empowerment (Coleman, 1986). For the older grandmothers in this group, transmitting family



history to their grandchildren appeared to secure feelings of continuity, helping to preserve a positive sense of self, and perhaps providing them with an opportunity through which, as the story teller, they can take up a significant role.

### **Extending discourses of mothering into grandmothering**

The idea of aiming to be successful mothers and grandmothers was central to many of the women's stories. Childhood development literature, magazines, television programmes and everyday conversations based upon psychological child development theories constantly remind women of how they *should be* in relation to children and what they *should do* to be good enough mothers. Motherhood is defined in relation to being 'sensitive' to the needs of the child. The child's psychological well-being and physical development are dependent on the 'sensitive' mother's accessibility and closeness. The child is seen as the 'cradle of the self', what is put into the child in early infancy is seen as vitally important in how that child will develop into adult life. Mothers are responsible for providing the 'correct' conditions and giving the right kind of mothering in order for the self to develop into a good citizen. Abnormal development is the result of bad mothering. The right kind of input is seen as a kind of immunization against the child growing up deviant.

The grandmothers in this study clearly continue to apply such discourses to themselves both with regard to their input as mothers and grandmothers. They assist their children to be 'good enough' parents and their grandchildren to develop into 'good' citizens. Reflecting on the self and their own performance as mothers, and grandmothers, they appeared to be constantly checking themselves and others against such ideas in order to evaluate theirs and others success or failure as mothers and as grandmothers. The penalties for having failed or being seen as a 'bad mother' are far-reaching. Mothers who abandon their

children are demonised by popular culture, the media and professionals as 'unnatural' women. It is clear from the findings that the grandmothers in this study share this feeling. Maureen, Phyllis and Doris appeared to take this view in relation to members of their families who had deserted their children, leaving them with no alternative, as they saw it, but to take on the role of primary carer for their grandchildren. The notion that children who behave badly or who do not succeed at school, or are not popular individuals, result from bad mothering was also in evidence. As members of the wider family, they appear to feel that they bear some responsibility for the future well-being of its members.

Many of the grandmothers appeared to make reference to psychological theories, perhaps read in self-help books, child care advice columns, magazines and TV programs, but Emma expressed these ideas particularly strongly, she appeared to accept such theories as being, in Foucault's terms, 'within the true' of our time and culture (Foucault, 1981). As Lawler argues, 'the knowledges generated by psy<sup>35</sup> are not normally represented as theories, open to contestation, but as truths about "human nature"' (Lawler, 2000:23); this happens to such a degree that, as Rose claims, 'it has become impossible to conceive of personhood, to experience one's own or another's personhood, or to govern oneself or others without 'psy'' (Rose, 1996:139). Emma spoke at length about the reasons why she felt that she was a better grandmother than a mother:

*Emma:* I think probably *knowing yourself*, first and foremost and knowing what's important to yourself as a person. I think, I think having the right attitude. I think probably most importantly is *your own sense of identity*. I think is probably most important and I think in that *everything else is built upon that*. I think...being thoughtful^ about your own kind of issues and working a lot out gets a lot of stuff out of the way really. So I think you can probably be more, kind of, calm and reassuring and you know, a

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<sup>35</sup> The term 'psy' is used here to refer to the kinds of psychological knowledges that have "escaped from their specialist enclaves to inform the work of other professionals in different settings and also have become accepted and understood in everyday life and inform the relationship of the self to itself through 'the unceasing reflexive gaze of our own psychologically educated self-scrutiny'" (Rose, quoted in Lawler, 2000:23).

grandmother that can kind of like *affirm the right attributes in their own grandchildren*. I perhaps didn't do that with Julie, but I wasn't mature enough. I really don't think, as a parent when I had Julie. ....I think *probably being a mother there's a lot of issues that you have to work through in a personal way* without having the responsibility of a child to take care of. I think probably *I felt quite immature, quite inadequate* to look after Julie, although now I feel really, kind of much more er...in control, and able to kind of give support to the grandson. It's just unfortunate that I didn't feel like that at the time that I was having Julie>. I think probably as I've got older a *sense of nurturing* is very important to me. I feel that I can actually give that in a more realistic way. Probably I understand what nurturing means more, and probably feel more equipped to nurture Kyle than I did feel equipped to nurture Julie,...unfortunately>. [Italics are my emphasis]. (Emma, aged 42).

Reflecting on her own experience of mothering Emma's use of psy words is evident. She speaks about 'knowing yourself' as being central to being a successful adult as everything else is built on that. She brings up the idea of 'working through issues' and 'getting stuff out of the way' as a process of getting to 'know yourself'. The idea of the importance of 'nurturing' and 'affirming the right attributes' in children as being the role of a mother recognises ideas of childhood as being the 'cradle of the self'. The mother is responsible for providing the proper conditions in order for the child to develop into a good citizen.

There is some evidence in Emma's story that she blames herself for her daughter's antisocial behaviour (her daughter had been excluded from school and was a teenage mother at age fifteen). Her statement that she felt 'inadequate' as a mother and 'it's just unfortunate' that she didn't have the knowledge that she now has as a grandmother when she was a mother illustrates her reflecting on her own performance as a mother and her regret that she hadn't had the knowledge to mother her own child 'adequately' as she understood being a 'good enough mother' to be.

The nature-nurture debate was clearly in evidence in this discussion with Emma. It was obviously something she had given considerable thought to in relation to her own childhood experience:

Int: So are you saying it's not an instinct to...

*Emma:* No it wasn't for me. It's been a learning really. Cos I kind of, like, you can analyse your own mum, how she kind of brought you up. I really think, you know, probably it's helped me to understand more of where my mum came from because I always felt quite disappointed in my own mother's ability, but she kind of like put me in at the deep end. She wasn't properly mothered and I think it is a very personal erm...sense of learning that you kind of gain as you get older really. (Emma, aged 42).

The relationship between the mother and the child and the importance of motherhood being constructed around meeting the needs of the child were clear in Emma's account of her relationship with her own mother. She had felt that she was an 'anxious child' who did not 'fit in' and her 'lack of confidence' and 'difficulty in relating to others' was the result of inadequate mothering. Emma obviously blamed her own mother for what she felt she lacked as a younger woman and for her own perceived failures as a mother. The fact that she felt that she wasn't properly mothered herself for Emma meant that she was not able to mother successfully. Psychological discourses and childhood developmental discourse are contained within this statement. This account clearly shows how common sense taken for granted 'truths' about nurturing children and 'good enough mothering' (Winnicott, 1964) have become accepted in everyday relationships between mothers and children and grandmothers and grandchildren.

### *A Happy Mother makes a good mother*

The construction of motherhood is a dynamic process that is both culturally and historically positioned (Bassin et al., 1994) therefore, at the turn of the century today's young women as mothers have different expectations from their mother's generation. Most young women will have worked before they have children, with or without a partner, and

appear to wish to retain a degree of independence once they become mothers. However, for others this will not be a matter of choice, either as single mothers or for other financial reasons, they will have to continue to work. Working mothers from the full-time professional independent career woman to the unskilled, part-time employee are rapidly becoming the norm. The full-time mother who stays at home and is dependent on her partner is becoming less and less common. Being an independent working-woman is part of the contemporary discourse of equality and it appears that many women do not wish to relinquish this situation once they become mothers. The influence of the discourse of social equality and feminist writings have played an important part in changing ideas about women's roles and gendered ways of bringing up children. Earlier cohorts of women had a different view of gender distinctions between girls and boys, expecting their daughters to be provided for by their husbands and their sons to be the breadwinners. Lorna who was born in 1954 and became a mother at age twenty-four spoke about the differences between her own and her daughter's generation:

*Lorna:* Oh, they want a lot more now don't they^, I think. I think things have changed a lot really – I mean I can't believe how much it has changed – I mean the attitude even towards marriage and things like that is so different. I mean they don't get married now, and it's moving in together, and they don't necessarily stick with one partner for very long either^, they don't seem to know what they want in that sort of way – but on the other hand they are also – I don't think it's a bad thing, I think they are more career minded and they want things for themselves and they don't want to be dependent on – like with me I suppose, when I first married one thing was that Garry had to get the job that earned the money.... and I was going, we were going, to have a family and I took time out, I mean I was out of work for quite a few years before I came to work at [...], well I had Jenny and Annie growing up and I mean I had just nicely had Stan I think – well he was coming up three when I started working at [...] So , it was, I think attitudes have changed a lot and it's like Jenny now she's already told me if she meets her ideal man he's going to be a man who takes his share in the ironing and washing and the cooking and that...and she's not doing, she says 'you must be joking I am not doing all this me, myself'. She said it's a shared thing we are going to both be,

umm, if we are both working, both doing at home and it's not...

Int: So she has got the expectation that she will work and have children?

*Lorna:* Yeah. And she definitely will do it....that is her ideal, she wants to be a career [person], into her career and earning good money. She would like that [laughs], I hope she does [laughs] I said 'and then you can take me on my holidays that I have missed' [laughs] ...

The attitudes of mothers who brought their children up in the 1960s and 1970s onwards has gradually been more inclined towards bringing both male and female children up to be independent and autonomous individuals. As discussed earlier Jane had very strong views about giving her daughters a better education than she had been 'allowed'. Generally they wanted more for their daughters than they had themselves. Lorna spoke about this in relation to her daughter:

*Lorna:* I had plans for her and hoped that things would go.....I wanted her to be one of those who would get off and see something of the world before she settled down, and time for herself, rather than stuck with a family. (Lorna, aged 47).

Connie, Helen, Kate, Irene and Emma all voiced similar sentiments. For most of the women, the lives of their daughters as mothers, was very different from their own experience as mothers. For younger cohorts of women, working outside the home as well as being 'working carers' within the home is the norm. The double-burden of women's work has been recognised for some time (Hochschild, 1989; Hochschild, 1997) but the caring work that many of the women in this study carried out often contained four elements, caring for their own families; caring for their grandchildren; caring for their parents and working outside the home. The work that many of the women carried out outside the home often involved caring in a professional capacity, either in the Health Service or Education, or caring in the sense of supporting those in more senior positions. Kate, who held a senior position in Higher Education,

was also involved in a great deal of 'caring' work in supporting students. Their capacity to care appeared to be enormous and the potential burden great.

### *Balancing the needs of the mother and child*

Although there are still many gender differences, and women remain the primary carers for children, it is now accepted that women return to work much earlier than previous generations. Women now try to balance the two areas of their lives retaining something of their life outside the home for themselves. The isolating and often depressing experience of being a full-time mother was discussed many times. The need for mothers to have another aspect to their lives was seen as an important element in women's well-being. Several of the grandmothers recounted ideas that were based on the idea that if the mother feels satisfied and happy she will pass on her feelings to the child and be a better mother. A mother who gives of herself completely, either to her partner or her children, runs the risk of becoming an unhappy and discontented mother, which in turn will have a detrimental affect on the child. Lorna spoke about her worries for her daughter and her granddaughter when she realised how unhappy her daughter was in her relationship and staying at home as a young mother. Lorna wanted her daughter to complete her university degree both for her daughter's own satisfaction and for her granddaughter's well-being:

*Lorna:* Well, I worried about both their health really and I looked at Jenny and I mean she wasn't well. You could see she was depressed and not coping and she was gaining a colossal amount of weight.....I mean she was a mess. And Garry, in the end he said 'Why don't we take Jenny and have a word with her and just say look we are concerned about how you are and if you feel that you can't, you know cope, come back home' and err I think she was glad we said it. She came back with us....she had no self confidence she had lost everything – she was, she said herself she wouldn't have argued with anybody because she hadn't got that confidence to answer anybody back – whereas now she will stand her ground and err if she has got an opinion about something she'll make her point and you know, she is quite strong again now.

Int: She's regained her self worth?

*Lorna:* She just felt that she had nothing and I think when she came back home it wasn't long before she was saying – and she was looking forward to getting back to University and getting herself sorted.

Int: She could see a future for herself again?

*Lorna:* Yeah. Yeah. So she was, err, you know, I would say back on the right road again really and she will be a better mum for it.

In this discourse the grandmother considers both the welfare of her daughter and her grandchild. On the part of the grandmother, however, the primary objective is still for the well-being of the child. Her own needs were placed on hold in order to give her daughter a chance to leave an unhappy relationship and complete her university degree that enabled her daughter to provide a brighter future for herself and her daughter. However, that is not to say that Lorna did not feel that she benefited from taking her daughter and granddaughter into her home:

*Lorna:* I am pleased that we did take Jenny in, yeah – I think you know that I am pleased for myself as well. I don't think I would have coped with it if she had carried on trying to be on her own... I think I feel happy with what she has done with her work at Uni. I think if we hadn't have offered her that support I don't think that would have come about, you know. I think that is reward in itself that she is managing to do what she wanted to do. (Lorna, aged 47).

Lorna's story is a good example of how mothers can gain their rewards vicariously through the part they play in their child's successes. Lorna's pride in her daughter's success as she sees it, 'against all the odds', reflects well on her own input as a mother and therefore, is experienced as empowering. In this case the mother feels that she has been a good enough mother to her child. The needs of the child continue to create the mother <sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> Lorna's efforts were rewarded: Jenny achieved two degrees while living at home with her mother and is now working in her chosen occupation.



However, the discourse of a happy mother makes a good mother could be interpreted differently. The idea that a child's well-being is dependent on a mother's well-being, in this case being absent from the child through working, could be understood as employed mothers *constructing* an alternative understanding of motherhood (Uttal, 1999) in order to ease the guilt and remove the sanctions that the previously discussed dominant discourse of motherhood as the accessible, sensitive mother imposes on them. It is also a possibility that grandmothers as the 'closest thing to a mother' (Mitchell, 1985; Eisenberg, 1988; Somary and Stricker, 1998), are used as the preferred carers to ease the guilt that might otherwise be felt by working mothers.

The discourse of a happy mother makes a good mother retains a child-centred understanding of motherhood that also allows a space and time for mothers. However, if the mother does not fulfil the needs of the child and places her own needs above those of the child then she becomes a 'bad' mother. She must carefully balance the two areas of her life. These parallel, but often competing, discursive positions can create many difficulties for working mothers. Grandmothers are often the facilitators who make this balancing act feasible (Uttal, 1999). Grandmothers, as the next best thing to mothers, are able to fulfil the role of the 'accessible' and 'attentive' mother, allowing the mother to work and fulfil her own needs outside the home without feeling the guilt of denying her child what is socially accepted as its essential needs in order to develop normally and realize its full potential.

### *The Child as Family Project*

What is now recognised as the child-centredness of family life is a relatively new phenomenon; in today's families only the best will do for the child, materially, psychologically and physically. The development of the child to its full potential is paramount. The child's stages of development are checked and re-checked in order to assess its normal development relying on the correct input from parents, particularly mothers. Even the unborn child is constantly monitored. The mother's

body is constantly under surveillance in order to provide the right conditions for a healthy child.

There is a 'widespread tendency to turn childhood into an educational project within the family' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995:133), with grandparents too adopting this responsibility. As the findings have shown, the diversity of input grandmothers provide is enormous. Grandmothers are happy to be used as a family resource in order to make their own children's lives easier, and gain satisfaction vicariously through their grandchildren's achievements. Feeling that they could contribute towards their grandchildren's future was one of the main pleasures associated with a grandmother's involvement with her grandchildren. Being happy to reorganise their time in order to be involved in their grandchildren's lives, in a way that was described as perhaps providing feelings of connectedness and an anchor in an ever-changing world (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), was a story repeated by many of the grandmothers. Gill explained this feeling:

*Gill:* I like it. You know, ...I feel part of, er, being, being involved really. I'm quite happy if they'll just go 'oh can you do so and so mam'. Oh yes. And then I put my things aside because I could do them later.... Doing things with them gives me a nice feeling, you know, when everything seems to change so fast ..I mean just being with them is so nice. (Gill, aged 51).

### *The Merging of Dominant Discourses of Mothering and Grandmothering*

The discourse surrounding successful grandmothering is one of non-interference and was one that most grandmothers negotiated very carefully. Allowing the mother her own autonomy and finding her own way was also very important and is part of the discourse of successful parenting. The women showed themselves to be adept at helping and giving advice but in a way that did not appear to be disagreeing with or overriding the mothers. An interest in and keeping abreast with current theories and childcare practices was very evident, but this was always evaluated against their own experiences. This was something they felt

had been earned and should be respected. However, most were careful not to be too hasty about giving advice when not asked. Respecting the autonomy and independence of their children was important. When asked if she was conscious of not interfering as being part of being a successful grandmother Irene had this to say:

*Irene:* I do try [not to interfere], yes I do try because I know that it is a touchy spot. I have been told on a couple of occasions because if they're arguing then I'm straight in, 'no you don't do' and [the daughter says] 'mother this is my house' and I think oh, yeh. So yeh, you are aware to sort of try and keep quiet until you are asked. It isn't always possible but I do try. Just really so you don't upset the apple cart.

*Int:* So do you think that's another attribute of successful grandmothers then, that they have to take a step backwards sometimes?

*Irene:* If they can, if they can. I think the secret is, the magic words are 'do not interfere' because they don't like it. So yes, and sometimes it is hard.

*Int:* To be supportive without....

*Irene:* Without interfering. It's an art. Or plant the seed – my mum always used to say, 'plant the seed in their minds and let them tell you it'. (Irene, aged 53).

As discussed earlier, Doris discovered the penalties for over-stepping the mark and interfering by being critical can be enormous. Her criticism of her daughter's partner's treatment of her grandson resulted in Doris having no further contact with her daughter.

Motherhood is constructed in response to the perceived needs of the child, [grand]motherhood constructed in response to the needs of their own child as the parent and *also* in relation to the needs of the grandchild. At times these two needs may not fit easily. The problem for grandmothers is managing the balancing act of fulfilling the two roles comfortably. In some cases when grandmothers have to take over as 'mother' to protect the grandchild, this then means that they have possibly failed as a parent to their own child in taking away their responsibility. They may have to acknowledge that if their own child is

not behaving responsibly as a 'good enough citizen' as mothers they have failed. Kate's concern about her grandson's future in the context of her son's drug addiction caused her immense distress and confusion about where she might have gone wrong as a parent:

*Kate:* I suppose I feel a bit dubious about the future [for her grandson] you know because of John. You know as a child that was so carefully nurtured and given everything, and end up in such a bloody mess, you know, and what the hell is the hope for Tom! (Kate, aged 55).

Laura's description of the relationship as being companionate (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986) would appear to give an idea of a more equal relationship than with parents. The two most predominant discourses surrounding grandparenting are notions of grandparents spoiling grandchildren (Kahana and Kahana, 1971; Kivnick, 1980) as well as the idea of successful grandparenting being one of 'not interfering' (Kornhaber and Woodward, 1981; Johnson, 1983; Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986) with the parent's ideas on child-care. Perhaps these two discourses work together to create a situation where the time the grandmother spends with the grandchild becomes more on the grandchild's terms than those of the grandmother. The grandmother sees her role as 'being there' to give love and lavish attention on the child and to leave the discipline to the mother.

Caring for grandchildren can then become a life project in older age and as a continuum of the role of mother as part of the recipe for successful ageing; or as MacDonald sees it, being a grandmother in this way can be seen as a continuation of the gendered restrictions on self development, which is at best an identity experienced 'third hand' (Macdonald and Rich, 1984). The danger for a grandmother of maintaining the child as project, associated with her earlier role as mother, rather than what she perceives of as the alternative of being socially unproductive and disconnected, is something that needs to be considered. The benefits for the middle generation, and for grandchildren, are clear but my concern for those grandmothers heavily involved with caring for grandchildren in their middle age is that they

might restrict the already limited options for a life of their own. The need for grandmothers to be involved with childcare diminishes as the grandchildren age therefore, they may be simply delaying the situation where they are no longer needed by their families. By choosing to not to continue in the role of carers for their families, they may be in a better position to take advantage of opportunities that could bring about positive changes in their lives for later years. However, my concerns did not appear to be the concerns of many of the women interviewed. This I found quite surprising considering the amount of what appeared to be sacrifices of time and money the women made. It was clear that my location as a grandmother, but also a middle-class PhD student with a background in Women's Studies, was giving me a different perspective on their lives that most of them did not appear to share.

### **Summary**

To sum up then, acknowledging the importance of the discourse of motherhood in the construction and maintenance of female identity, grandmotherhood is recognised as a continuation of, or another level of, mothering. Continuity and connectivity are important concepts that need to be addressed in understanding what it means to be a grandmother. I contend that an individual grandmother's sense of self will be formed through a complex weaving together of her socially interactive roles, for example as a wife, mother, grandmother, daughter, employee and friend. Following Morgan's (1996) metaphor of the kaleidoscope, at times one identity may take precedence while another may take up a supporting role and others may fade into the background, either permanently or for a particular period of time. The fusion of these differing aspects of the self and 'time' over a life course merge with commonly understood dominant discourses of what it means to be a mother, grandmother and an older woman.

# Chapter 7

## Grandmothers: Gender, Age, Time and Identity

The previous three chapters have explored what grandmothers do and why, and have begun to consider the social, demographic and cultural factors influencing the meaning, experience and practice of being a grandmother. This chapter attempts to answer the main research question, that is: what does it *mean* to be an older woman as a grandmother. I theorise self and identity based on my findings and discuss how gender, age and time overlay and intersect with every level of social life and our understanding of the self. The question I am seeking to answer here is, are grandmothers the authors of their own biographies or the co-authors of others'?

I contend that gender, age and time are barely perceptible threads that structure much of the pattern of our lives. It is the closeness of the weave that makes the individual threads so difficult to detect and therefore their significance in the formation of the self often remains untheorised. Although gender and age have been discussed in relation to each other (Macdonald and Rich, 1984; Arber and Ginn, 1995a; Browne, 1998; Calasanti and Slevin, 2001), as have gender and time (Chambers, 1986; Davies, 1990), the level of connectedness of all three elements in creating meaning for ageing women is rarely theorised. When undertaking a critical analysis of how older women as grandmothers come to understand the self, gender, age and time are intersecting factors that need to be brought clearly into focus.

Within this chapter I draw on the theoretical position of feminist writers who maintain that gender is a social construct (De Beauvoir, 1972; Delphy, 1993). Gender is so deeply embedded within all aspects of

social life that it seems invisible and thus often remains ignored and untheorised (Pateman, 1988; Fraser, 1989; Marshall, 1994). Gender impacts on our relationship to time and ageing: gender, identity and our use of time in everyday life are closely intertwined. As Fraser argues, if the gender subtext is extracted and analysed:

It then becomes clear that feminine and masculine identity run like pink and blue threads through the domain of familial and sexual relations. This is to say that gender and identity are lived out in all arenas of life (Fraser, 1989:127-128).

In addition as people age they may experience the negative effects of institutional and social ageism (Butler, 1975), and that as women they may suffer the 'double standard' of ageism and sexism (Sontag, 1978 [1972]), then it becomes clear that it is crucial to discover how these factors experienced together impact on the self. As age too is a social construct this can have a major impact on our understanding of the self. Biggs emphasises, social life is not only gendered but also 'gerontized' (Biggs, 1993:21). Making the link between experience and practice, I argue that time, as the essential ingredient by which we mark and measure almost every aspect of everyday life, is also gendered both in the ways in which it is used and understood (Chambers, 1986; Davies, 1990; Seymour, 1992).

If we accept that gender and ageing are social constructs, and we follow Marshall's argument that the changes that have taken place in modern times are all 'gendered processes' (Marshall, 1994), it is important that the gendered processes at work in producing an individual's sense of self need to be recognised and analysed. Within this chapter then, I apply a gender lens to what is generally accepted to be the basis of society, the universal nature of late modernity's individual<sup>37</sup> and the vitally important, but often ignored relationships

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<sup>37</sup> I use the term 'late modern' individual within this thesis following theorists such as Beck (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995; 1996), Giddens (1990; 1991;

between gender and age. I propose as feminists have argued, that the dominant conceptualisation of the individual within Western society is a gender blind model of late modernity's autonomous individual and it is based on understanding and knowledge of the white, middle-class heterosexual male (Pateman, 1988; Marshall, 1994). Add to this that the individual is likely to be a middle-aged, middle-class white male, and that time is also defined in terms that best suits a male understanding of time, and the picture of how older women as grandmothers construct a sense of self in relation to the above mentioned models becomes critical.

I argue that the accepted model of late modernity's individual and the dominant understanding of time, are not consonant with how older women as grandmothers understand the self, a situation that could lead to older women being marginalised and devalued by those who define the standards by which they are measured. I will begin to make my argument by discussing 'time' both as a way in which our lives are measured and also in terms of the ways in which we utilise it in our everyday lives.

### **Gendering time**

'Time', as a crucial marker and essential ingredient of social life is crucial to any analysis of what it means to be a grandmother. I argue that the prevailing understanding of 'time' as Davies (1990) proposes, is gendered. The dominant view of time is that it is experienced in a linear fashion, it tends to be project driven, or associated with production and monetary reward; this does not necessarily fit with how much of women's time is experienced (Davies, 1990). This is clear from my

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1992; 1993; 1994), Beck-Gernsheim (1998; 2002) and Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994) who argue for an understanding of the individual within society as being placed within a transition stage, a period that can be described as late or second modernity.



findings, which demonstrate the complex relational nature of my participants' lives as grandmothers. Time, as it is generally understood is based on a set of values and norms that are more closely aligned to a male relationship to time and this does not capture the subjective experience of how grandmothers' time is experienced.

### *Grandmothers' relationship to time*

Ignoring gender as a factor overlooks much of how time is experienced and practiced in everyday life. The dominant, what I will refer to as male understanding of time, is one that views time and ageing in a linear fashion:

In our usual view, we represent time as having a standard significance. We see it as operating in a fixed and inevitable way – as ushering in, though chronological age, human changes that are wanted or unwanted. We view time as essentially linear – as going in one direction only (Salmon 1985 quoted in Davies, 1990:185).

Time can be defined in several ways. Distinctions have been made between linear and cyclical time (Hernes, 1988), linear and spatial time (Cottle, 1976), individual time, historical time and family time (Hareven, 1978; Hareven and Adams, 1982); distinctions between cohort and chronological age and historical periods (Goldthorpe et al., 1980), calendar time, social time and personal time (Blaxter, 1992), and between family time, domestic time, work and leisure (Chambers, 1986). It is important to recognise the different aspects of time:

One purpose of making these distinctions is to argue that there is not, even within a given culture, one time and one space but a multiplicity of times and spaces all weaving into and interacting with each other (Hernes, 1988:104).

And as Urry argues, '[...] time and space should be seen as produced and producing, as contested and determined and as symbolically represented and structurally organized' (Urry, 1990:160).

Time, far from being an objective fact, independent of our own making, and something with a single definition, has many aspects to it and is gendered in the ways that it is experienced and practiced, particularly in the context of everyday family life (Chambers, 1986; Davies, 1990; Seymour, 1992; Jerrome, 1994). It is experienced differently in different contexts, for example in the family, at work and at different ages. Following Davies (1990) and others (Chambers, 1986; Seymour, 1992; Hochschild, 1997), my findings have illustrated in different ways, that the experience of being a grandmother is based on an understanding of time that is 'relational', that is in relation to and connected with significant others.

Studies of time have generally omitted to examine and theorise the relationship between gender, generation and time. Gender, generation and age cohort bring different experiences and different relationship to both the time we are living in and time as a resource. How individuals use, relate to, and organise their time helps to explain different subjectivities. I follow Davies (1990), who argues that women generally have a different relationship to time from men. Women experience time in relation to their families and as a resource in everyday life. This pattern is clear in my data. As Chambers (1986) argues, women's perception of time takes place in 'a distinct and contrasting cultural framework' (1986:313).

In thinking about time in connection with grandmothers lives we cannot focus simply on 'individual' time, or time as unidirectional linear time, moving forwards at a given pace, but time also needs to be considered as connected to others and in relation to a lifetime. An examination of the respondents' daily lives reveals that their time is intricately linked to

others' time and daily lives. Their time is lived in relation to husbands, children, kin and parents, as well as in relation to the community. The context in which their lives are lived is influenced by, and acts upon, time both as a resource and a marker of social events.

### *The passage of time*

As my findings have illustrated the grandmothers understand and construct their time and experience growing older in ways that reflect their previous lives, lives which have been, and continue to be, predominantly experienced in relation to the times and needs of significant others. This factor that may also put them in a materially disadvantaged and less powerful position in later life (Arber and Ginn, 1991).

Ageing too, in the sense of time passing, is gendered. It is clear that individuals take on a different relationship to time at different points in a life-course. From the middle-years a different perspective on time develops and the finiteness of time becomes apparent. Life is restructured in terms of time-left-to-live rather than time since birth (Neugarten, 1979). The notion has been put forward that people in their fifties feel an enriched sense of self and a capacity for coping with complexity (ibid 1979). The idea that persons in mid-to-later life become more reflective, introspective, and self-aware is indicated by a number of studies (Erikson, 1950; Neugarten, 1979; Rose, 2000). To a young child time may seem to pass slowly and the prospect of a lifetime may appear endless, whereas, as our lives become more complex and responsibilities increase, time appears to pass more quickly and comes to be in short supply. The finiteness of time as we age becomes apparent and is often feared. In today's fast moving society time as a resource is also under pressure. Men are said to have a more linear,

forward planning, project driven model of time, one linked to a greater market or rational planning orientation (Cottle, 1976), while, as Morgan (1996) states:

Women may have a more fluid concept of time or times, one that is partly cyclical and one which is spatial, involving the allocation and juggling of a multiplicity of times. These different conceptions of time derive from structured gender inequalities, but still tend to take on a life and meaning of their own in the context of everyday household situations' (Morgan, 1996:149).

Time, therefore, can be said to be gendered and can be experienced in many different ways. An important aspect of time is the process of getting older, of time passing and the differing importance of time for different generations.

One of the features in almost all of the houses I visited was what I have termed a 'shrine' to the family (see Chapter 3, illustration 3). This was in the form of photographs, and possibly certificates of individuals' successes, that were displayed in such a way that it often resembled an altar or a shrine. This could be interpreted as a mark of the self, showing the origins of the family, or as a symbol of the self that will continue on after death. This shrine appeared as a thing of substance, chosen and carefully displayed. It clearly represents something important to the person putting the shrine together, but it also has significance as a public display of the family to those visiting the home. The positioning of the photographs and objects illustrates the relative importance of a particular picture and what it represents to others. The picture of a newborn might come to the front, thus moving further back the picture of a marriage or a past christening.

Family history is always in the process of being made, reflected upon and re-assessed. However, the needs and wishes of the lives of

individual family members do not always synchronize well. Different generations at differing points along a life-course may find themselves in potentially conflicting and disruptive positions. The timing of life events is important. As Jerrome (1994) states:

The family consists of different lives in interaction, each with their own developmental issues and needs. The form the interaction takes will depend on relative ages and such demographic factors as the timing of births and deaths, and other movements into and out of the family system. The relationship between personal and family timetables is a complex one which needs to be understood in particular historical contexts. Individual developmental expectations can conflict with family developmental expectations, given the number of timetables, calendars, clocks or rhythms on which people operate simultaneously. The lack of fit between different timetables produces time-disordered relationships or desynchronisation. The timing of individual transitions has reciprocal effects (Jerrome, 1994:17).

The data shows that the timing of events in the life-course of individual women, such as the birth of a grandchild, is crucial to how that event is experienced. Individuals have expectations about when and under what conditions they will become grandmothers. Most women would not expect to become grandmothers to children of their teenage daughters, nor would they expect to become surrogate mothers to their grandchildren. The timetables of grandmothers and daughters who were teenage mothers, and grandmothers acting as primary carers to their grandchildren, were clearly not synchronized. In such cases the material and emotional resources of the family as a whole, and the grandmothers in particular, were often stretched to breaking point. However, being part of a family is to be part of an on-going system changing in composition over time, adapting and continuing through time. Family time is not simply unilinear, it ebbs and flows like the tide and, with the formation of new generations, it has a cyclical quality (Jerrome, 1994).

The everyday experience of women as they age, is, with a few notable exceptions (Macdonald and Rich, 1984; Arber and Ginn, 1991; Bernard and Meade, 1993; Arber and Ginn, 1995b; Arber and Ginn, 1995a; Arber and Evandrou, 1997; Browne, 1998; Bernard et al., 2000; Calasanti and Slevin, 2001), something that much of traditional social science theorising, including feminist theorising, has tended to ignore. The dominant understanding of ageing is bound up with a linear consciousness of time. The substance of what is generally understood as constituting a lifetime is something that is marked and signposted by appropriate ages and stages, abilities and capacities, reaching a peak in mid-life, dipping towards an inevitable decline into old age. This understanding of a life course as one of a steady deterioration into dependency would not appear to be true of the grandmothers in this study regardless of which age cohort they belong to. They are constantly adjusting their very full lives, fitting in and adapting to fill in gaps in childcare and other forms of caring work for their families and, as many of the women are also in employment, managing their time extremely effectively. Their use of time, and how their time is utilised by others, is an important aspect of any understanding of what it means to be a grandmother. That is not to say that many of the grandmothers do not experience 'work time' in the way that the dominant approach to time takes for granted, however, they experience this alongside the very different demands of familial time.

### *Time as a family resource*

Within families time can be considered as a resource in itself. This resource is subject to many competing demands and is valued in different ways by individual family members. Time is in short supply in modern society. The competing demands on women's time can have

the effect of compacting time. The notion of a 'time famine' (Hochschild, 1997) is well recognised in most modern households. Modern mothers in particular are caught in the 'time-bind' often juggling the needs of the family with that of a job. As Seymour (1992) states, 'regardless of a move to some form of paid employment, for most women the "dual burden" will continue and women with families will frequently find they still have "no time to call their own"' (Seymour, 1992:191).

Traditionally, we conceive of time as being an equally distributed resource where each individual receives his/her allotted share. Even in working life, we start from the premises of individual time. But if we take a look at how women use their time, it is obvious that it is rather a question of 'collective' time which others, for example their families, have a right to lay claim to. Members of a family can use each other's time to a certain extent, but it is most frequently women's time, which is made use of as regards caring work and housework. The time that she is able to use for paid work is adjusted to the other family members' need of time. The time that she needs for herself and her interests is often given very little, if any space (Ressner quoted in Davies, 1990:15).

The previous two chapters have shown that the grandmothers in this study are very active in the lives of their children and grandchildren and are often very happy to give their time and energy to be used as a family resource. In this case time is understood as something concrete that can be given in the form of labour. The women in this study have shown that they manage their time very effectively. As mentioned in chapter five, a feature in many of the homes was a complex timetable created around the needs of different members of their family. The women were happy to fit their personal lives around such things as grandchildren being dropped off or picked up from school, doctors appointments, school plays, football games, drama classes and so on. They were willing to put on hold major things such as changing a career path or taking holidays in order to make themselves available for the

benefit of 'the family'. Their understanding of time is therefore experienced in relation to their families and they consider their experience and their time is something that has an intrinsic value that can be used for the continuity and benefit of the family. They were willing to give their time for no monetary reward, the reward for them being the well-being of family members. As Davies (1990) states, women in many cases put time with the family before time for monetary gain.

### *Time as a gift*

As Chapter Five has shown grandmothers give a considerable 'labour of love' to their families. A feature of many of the women's stories is that they regard 'time' as the most precious gift a grandmother can give to her grandchild. Giving time is equated with giving of the self. Giving up your time in order to benefit another is seen as something worthwhile for both parties concerned. Spending time with someone is the only way to build a meaningful relationship and get to know what makes that particular person tick. Having someone within the family who has the time, or who can *make* the time, to do those time consuming little things, or just be there to listen to the needs of others is a very precious resource within modern families. Grandmothers appear to fulfill this requirement in many of the cases in this study.

### *Continuity of the self experienced through the continuity of the family*

Through time, as older women the grandmothers reported that they have learned the value of giving time in relationships. Their understanding of the self is lived in relation to the lives of others and is experienced as a part of the continuity of something larger than the self, their project being the family. All of the women were concerned with the continuation of their families, and some appeared also to have an



understanding of the self as continuing through their families. At the psychological level, the concept of generativity is useful in recognising an individual's need to perpetuate herself through connecting with and influencing the next generation. However, within families there is always the potential for tensions to arise between generations. One generation's desire for continuity and connection can be in opposition to another's wish for separation and distinctiveness (Jerrome, 1994). The participants appeared to give their time for the pleasure of contributing to the continuity of the family, to maintain a role in the family and in order to receive love in return. How, then, does this understanding of grandmothers' relationships to time and the family help us understand the construction of the self. How does being involved in a continuing 'project of the family' correspond to the dominant perception of the late modern individual as being involved with the ever changing 'project of the self'.

### **Gendering late modernity's individual**

Within modern Western society, the prevailing idea of what constitutes an individual is based on a universal ideal of the late modern, autonomous individual. Such an individual is considered to be concerned with the 'self as project' (Giddens, 1991), or the agent of a 'do-it-yourself' life history (Beck et al., 1994; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and therefore 'living a life of one's own' (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This understanding of the self is theorised in terms of reflexive modernization. In this view, late modernity is characterised by the suggestion that, in the new social order, there exists an increased capacity for reflexivity.

However, as Adkins (2002) states, there is no one definitive meaning of reflexivity. She cites Lash (1994) as having identified two forms of

reflexivity that are useful starting points in understanding reflexive modernity. The first form is structural reflexivity, whereby subjects reflect both on the rules and resources of social structure and on the conditions of existence of the subject itself (Adkins, 2002). Thus Beck has commented, 'the more societies are modernized, the more agents (subjects) acquire the ability to reflect on the social conditions of their existence and to change them accordingly' (Beck et al., 1994:174). The second understanding is the one I am concerned with in this context, and that is self-reflexivity. Self-reflexivity is understood as a condition where the subject reflects on its self, creating a situation of self-monitoring<sup>38</sup>.

### *The self as a 'reflexive' project*

For Giddens, the context of late modernity means that the constitution of the self becomes an increasingly reflexive project: 'we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves' (Giddens, 1991:174). Adkins when discussing reflexivity as a means of theorising identity, cites Melucci who comments that: 'identity is in the process of being refined as a pure reflexive capacity of self-awareness' (Melucci quoted in Adkins, 2002:15). According to Giddens (1992) the performance of a 'reflexive project of the self' where self-identity is constituted by reflexive ordering of self-narratives, is key to participation in the late modern practice of intimate relations, especially achieving the 'pure relationship' involving emotional and intimate equality.

Reflexivity, then, is taken to characterize all areas of social life, it is said to constitute new practices of intimacy and ways of interacting, for example 'family' ties are now understood in less in terms of obligations and fixed 'ties of blood' and more in terms of negotiated commitments

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<sup>38</sup> For a full analysis of gender, sexuality and late modernity and the condition of reflexivity see Adkins (2002).

and bonds. As Adkins maintains:

Many of modernity's key collective categories of belonging such as status and class are therefore now less a matter of external forms of determination and more a matter of individual decisions (Adkins, 2002:15).

Taken to its ultimate conclusion as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim state:

Life, death, gender, corporeality, identity, religion, marriage, parenthood, social ties – all are becoming decidable down to the small print; once fragmented into options, everything must be decided (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002:5).

Such a process of continued rapid social change therefore is said to lead to a condition of detraditionalization and individualization and notions of a fragmented self (Beck, 1992). If traditional family obligations and ties are breaking down and the self is experienced as fragmented by the process of constantly being faced with choices, where are women located, particularly as mothers and grandmothers?

*Living for 'the family' or living 'a life of one's own'?*

As I have discussed, the dominant discourses in society traditionally fix women in close relation to their families, and my findings bear this out. Such a view envisages women *not* as the universal, gender neutral, autonomous individual pursuing a linear career path of *self* fulfillment, but as society's carers, adapting to the complex ebb and flow of life lived *in relation* to the needs of others, and therefore perceived of as 'living for the family'. Each individual grandmother in this study could be described as certainly at one level, 'living for her family' and yet she is living in an age where the individual is represented as an autonomous individual 'living a life of her own'. The question is how a grandmother makes sense of this paradox, and what strategies does she use to incorporate or discard such conflicting models of the self, as lived out in the context of their everyday life?

The study of the everyday is important because it is at the level of human interaction and interpersonal relationships that the making of the self occurs. As Elliot (2001) argues through examining the dynamics of interpersonal interaction:

The self can be thought of as a central mechanism through which the individual and the social world intersect. As such, the self, along with the attendant interpretations and definitions of situation and context that individuals routinely make in daily life, must be fully taken into account for the purposes of social analysis (Elliott, 2001:24).

The everyday routine practices of 'embodied' individuals therefore become the central object of analysis. As Smith (1988) argues, it is important to recognize that the standpoint from which women view the world is different from that of the dominant male view represented as universal. Smith suggests that the standpoint of women:

Directs us to an 'embodied' subject located in a particular actual local historical setting. Her world presents itself to her in its full particularity – the books on her shelves, the Cowichan sweaters she has bought for her sons' birthdays, the Rainforest chair she bought three years ago in a sale, the portable computer she is using to write on, the eighteenth-century chair, made of long-since-exhausted Caribbean mahogany, one of a set of four given her by her mother years ago – each is particularized by insertion into her biography and projects as well as by its immediacy in the now in which she writes. The abstracted constructions of discourse or bureaucracy are accomplishments in and of her everyday world (Smith, 1988:108).

The importance of locating the grandmothers in this study in the context of their everyday worlds, that is in 'the local historicity and particularities of their lived worlds' (Smith, 1988:8) is vital in attempting to understand what it means to be a grandmother at this point in time.

### *Individualization*

It is said that to live as an individual in the period of late modernity is to live in a time of rapid social change associated with notions of complexity, uncertainty, unlimited choice, and with the assumption that everything, including the self, is in a state of flux. Under such conditions the self is understood as being fragmented, disconnected and constantly in a state of reflecting on the self, leaving behind traditional fixed roles and ways of being. As I have discussed in the previous chapters, the grandmothers in this study are responding to many of the changes that have occurred in women's lives over the last century. Such changes in younger women's lives have meant that many have at least partly moved outside the confines of the family in ways that are often contradictory to traditional family centred views of women's lives. Within the new social order, a perspective of autonomy and self-sufficiency is held out to them and such a view of subjectivity is ostensibly gender neutral, insisting on the rights of the individual and equal subjectivity of men and women. The result of this for individual women is that such changes increasingly mean that they develop expectations, wishes and life-projects that relate not only to the family, but also to their own persons. Most women are now said to 'no longer think of themselves just as an appendage of the family, but must increasingly come forward as individuals with their own interests and rights, plans and choices' (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998:59). There is a demand and a pressure for women to have a 'life of their own'. This is said to mean that in women's biographies too, the logic of individualism rather than that of a traditional family based design is gradually asserting itself, with an obligatory duty to the over-all needs of the family breaking down (Beck, 1992; Beck et al., 1994; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Rapid social change at both a global and individual level has meant that

'as a result of historical developments, then, a trend towards individualization has made itself felt' (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998:57). Individualization is understood as a historical process that increasingly brings into question people's traditional ways of life which brings with it uncertainty about ways of being, and as a result, more people are said to be forced to piece together their own biographies and incorporate their individual needs as best they can. As Beck-Gernsheim states: 'To put it bluntly, the normal life-history is giving way to the do-it-yourself life history' (1998:57). This increasingly affects relations between family members at a number of levels and family life becomes a 'daily balancing act' or a permanent 'do-it-yourself' project (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998:59). Such autonomous individuals are said to find themselves without clear-cut assumptions, beliefs or values and are faced with the almost impossible task of combining their individual choices *within* the constraints of familial relations and material resources, as well as complying with social norms and institutional controls and boundaries. This 'balancing act' is clearly not easy at any level but, at the level of the family, when traditionally accepted gender roles are being questioned, alternative family practices expected, and normative models of ageing resisted, the 'balancing-act' can become extremely precarious. What is clearly evident from this study is the key role that grandmothers play in helping to sustain this 'balancing act' for others; the problem for grandmothers, however, is to find a way of negotiating a balance between their own needs and those of others.

If individuals have to become 'actors, builders, jugglers, stage managers of their own biographies and identities and also of their social links and networks' (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002:23), this would indeed seem to herald the end of the communality of family networks. However, in contrast to such a view, traditional notions of 'the family' and 'family values' are held up as the 'ideal' on which much political

rhetoric and social policy is based. Further, at the level of the individual, as my data reveals and as I have shown in the review of the literature, family life remains the model on which most people *choose* to live their lives (Finch and Mason, 1993; Morgan, 1996). Moreover, '*continuity* rather than change is the defining feature of women's position relative to that of men, both in employment and in the family' (Silva and Smart, 1999:38 italics my emphasis). Family life is indeed changing and adapting, but for most people being part of something we call 'the family' plays an important part in the construction of individual biographies (Morgan, 1996; Silva and Smart, 1999). As Arber and Ginn (1995b) suggest, the presumption that the advances that women have made in the labour market, are indicative of more general changes towards gender equality within the private sphere of the home, is unfounded. Changes in family practices and family forms and changes in women's working practices do not necessarily equate with the 'death of the family' per se, nor does it follow that they bring about gender equality in the home.

### **Gender, ageing, autonomy and 'the family' as a site of struggle**

The social changes that have occurred in family life have resulted in increased choices for women both in work opportunities and the ways in which relationships are now understood. The large numbers of women choosing to continue to work after childbirth (Crompton and Harris, 1998), the increase in co-habitation (Office for National Statistics, 2002a) and women choosing to live alone (Office for National Statistics, 2002b), rising divorce rates, particularly because of increasing numbers of women filing for divorce (Smart and Neale, 1999), and with grandmothers increasingly being utilised as a means of support when relationships break down (Dench and Thomson, 1999) now means that family life has become a site of struggle. As Beck-Gernsheim notes:

In many respects they [women] have left behind the horizon of

expectations and experience typical of their social class and previously customary female roles. Their life plans are different from those of their parents, especially their mothers. *This gap between the generations requires young women to make their own projects and actions, to work out their own ideas about the future, with little support from any model or tradition.* [italics in the original] (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002:59).

As my findings show, the grandmothers appear to have taken on board the ideal of the autonomous late modern individual, the 'child as project', as the model on which they base their aspirations for their children and grandchildren.<sup>39</sup> And as I have shown in Chapters Four and Five, they are indeed *responding* to changes in younger women's understanding of the self.

They are also responding to changes in social policy, that is with less support by the state, and more emphasis on care in the community, (which in reality means care by the family, which in turn means care by women in that family) women in the middle years are being called upon by both younger and older generations for care (Phillips 2000). My data bears this out, showing that several of the participants are caring for three generations of their families. Such a situation would appear to mean that for the women in the middle years there is very little chance of living 'a life of one's own'. The constraints of prevailing social and cultural norms of their time, together with today's social policies, leave them with little or no alternative but to take on the responsibilities of caring for their dependent family members, not to do so would be to incur severe social penalties.

As older women however, they have no clear model to follow. As Chapter Six has shown their role as mothers and grandmothers are

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<sup>39</sup> As I have attempted to show in Chapter Six, this model of the child is the basis of developmental psychology and the standard by which women judge their success as 'good enough' mothers and grandmothers.



often different from those of their own mothers. Many of the grandmothers and the majority of the mothers of their grandchildren work outside the home affording them some degree of independence. However, changing patterns of family life have meant that they are perhaps, as other research has found, more involved than previous generations with their grandchildren (Kornhaber, 1996; Dench et al., 1999). Caring for grandchildren is, for many of the women, something from which they gain satisfaction but the level of caring is not what many had anticipated.

As Chapter Five indicated, for some women mid-life was expected to be a time of less involvement with and responsibility for the needs of family members. It was expected to be 'a time of one's own' perhaps to take up employment outside the home, or perhaps for a career change, or perhaps to work less and concentrate on personal interests and quality of life. For several of the women negotiating a path between the needs of their family and their own required major adjustments to their life plans often resulting in their making personal sacrifices. The needs of the family were in most cases seen as the priority. For example, Emma put her own career plans on hold in order to help her daughter and grandson: Doris gave up her chance of employment to care for her grandchildren: and as Kate's story made clear, the experience of being a full-time further education lecturer, the mother of four, and a grandmother of three, created for her a very hectic and as she described it a 'ludicrous situation'. Her life was pulled in so many directions that having 'time for herself' seemed an impossibility. However, when asked if they experienced this situation as a sacrifice, all of the women in the study said no at first, but, when probed further, they then agreed that perhaps they had made sacrifices, but these sacrifices were understood as worthwhile as they saw an improvement in the situation of their families. Not responding to the needs of their

children and grandchildren was something they could not have lived with.

The data clearly show that any attempt to fit the grandmothers in this study within the boundaries of a late modern autonomous individual (as it is generally understood) would be to leave unrecognised and untheorised much of how they experience their lives. How, then, do we begin to theorise an understanding of the self that adequately represents the experience of older women as grandmothers? Where do changes in the social order place older women? Are older women assumed to remain in traditional family roles or are they too expected to have taken on individualistic notions of the self or, as I have discussed earlier, are they simply responding to a changing social order as lived out by their children? Where do older women as grandmothers locate themselves in relation to the two seemingly opposing notions of the self discussed above and how do they identify with, negotiate and make sense of such ideas in their everyday lives? One of the questions I have asked of the data, therefore, is where do women locate themselves in relation to the 'I' of late modernity?

I propose that the 'do-it-yourself' project of subjectivity required of the 'I' of the accepted notion of a late modern autonomous, self-reliant individual, ignores the experience of the grandmothers in this study, who cannot because of their previous 'herstory' live in such a way. Such an understanding of individuals ignores differences such as gender, age, class and ethnicity and those who are severely disabled, those who are very young or very old and dependent on others for many aspects of their everyday needs. Those dependent individuals who live outside the boundaries of the model of the autonomous individual become marginalised (Morris, 1989; Morris, 1991).

Conversely, those individuals providing care, particularly women, who experience their lives *in relation* to the needs of others, are also placed outside its remit (Land and Rose, 1985). This is particularly relevant for mothers, and by extension grandmothers, as the discourses surrounding successful motherhood require a mother to be sensitive to the needs of her children, and available for them (Winnicott, 1964; Bowlby, 1969) thereby placing her own needs second to those of her children. As many grandmothers may still take an active role as mothers and in some cases may still have living parents to care for, this level of relation to others is doubly relevant.

Caring for and about others is undoubtedly skilled and very hard work which may be done out of duty or love or as a career, but living a life where one provides for and supports others does not appear to fit within the parameters of an autonomous, individuated notion of the self. While the late modern individual is said to be gender neutral, insisting on the equal subjectivity of men and women, the previously discussed notion of motherhood, and the discourses surrounding it, position maternal, and alongside it feminine subjectivity, as separate and distinct from that of the male. The notion of essential motherhood therefore, represents mothering and femininity, in terms that are distinctly at odds with subjectivity as defined for the late modern autonomous individual and so grandmotherhood, as it is generally understood, has the effect of excluding [grand]mothers and women in general from such an individualist subjectivity.

Individualism and essential motherhood together position women in a very basic double bind: essential motherhood requires mothering of women, but it represents motherhood in a way that denies mothers' and women's individualist subjectivity (DiQuinzio, 1999:xiii).

The notion of the autonomous late modern individual, defined as an

individual who is self-reliant, self-directing, self-interested and self-reflexive, is therefore not without its problems when applied to women's subjectivity. Autonomy defined in such a way takes a very individualistic and solitary view of human beings.

If autonomy represents the nature, perfection, or dignified expression of moral agency, but 'autonomous man' really is a *man*, how are we to understand women's moral agency? (Urban Walker, 2000:98, emphasis in the original).

Viewed in this way autonomy leaves outside its understanding the interactive and relational aspects of social life:

Autonomy cannot encompass the realities of human interdependence and community, nor explain the concrete conditions of responsibility, the commitments, and the attachments to others that move us to action. If autonomy is a value, on these views, it must be conditioned by and integrated with other values that express our social natures (Urban Walker, 2000:98).

Interdependence and having feelings of responsibility for the welfare of others are important factors that move us to act in the world. As Mead (1934) argues we are social beings and thus we cannot have an understanding of ourselves without constantly gauging how we interact with others and reflecting upon the self as both subject and object of that self-reflection. This measuring of the response of significant others to our actions is crucial in deciding future actions.

Although women continually adapt and make changes in their lives, the notion that women have a *natural* capacity and *desire* to care remains a constant within a changing world. Even though many women now work outside the home, the notion of women's natural capacity to care underpins gender inequalities within family life by assigning them the 'double burden' of paid work and all the various aspects of work that are

carried on within a family situation and the home. The task of coordinating a satisfactory everyday family life is a major undertaking that is only achieved with a great deal of preparation and caring work, both temporal and physical. This remains, for the most part, something that is done by women and is clearly done by the women in this study. For the participants their complex kin relations are fluid shifting over time, sometimes experienced as rewarding and sometimes as a problem.

### **Gendered power relations in family life**

I take the position that when examining gender power relations and family life, the female position may at times be one that is experienced as oppression, but that this is not the experience for all women in all situations. Power relations at the private level within the family are complex. As Stanley and Wise (1990) argue:

[the] experience of 'woman' is ontologically fractured and complex because we do not all share one single and unseamed material reality.....oppression should be seen as an extraordinarily complex process in which women are only rarely 'in extremis' totally powerless and in which women ordinarily utilise a range of resources – verbal, interactional and other – in order to fight 'back' (Stanley and Wise, 1990:22).

Many women and men may feel relatively powerless in the labour market, as in other areas of the public sphere, nonetheless, the private arena of the family may provide a woman with a place in which she can exercise considerable power and control (Kranichfeld, 1987). This, of course is not universally the case. It is now well recognized that for some women the family is the site of violence and abuse (Dobash and Dobash, 1979). However, as David Morgan argues:

We cannot, therefore, conclude that family and marital relationships are automatically disempowering for women and empowering for men. It may be suggested that where the experience of power is generally consistent with gendered expectations, then these experiences of power will play an important part in the shaping of gender identities. The workingman who is emotionally dependent upon his partner and the housebound woman who has clearly marked out areas of control and responsibility have their wider gender identities confirmed. Different and complex mixes of powerfulness and powerlessness, therefore, provide important strands in construction, and undermining, of gender identities through family relationships (Morgan, 1996:75).

Morgan argues for a more fluid understanding of power seeing family life or the household as a site for the meeting and working through of a variety of contradictions around gender identities and the gender order; 'the focus should be less upon structures and more on day-to-day claims and counter-claims and unresolved or unspoken tensions' (Morgan, 1996:79). It is this fluid, complex, often ambiguous and contradictory nature of family life as it is experienced on a daily basis, that impacts on gender identities and therefore influences experience and practice.

As Chapter Six has shown, motherhood, and by extension grandmotherhood, is implicitly taken to be the natural embodiment of a female identity. Notions of essential [grand]motherhood have, therefore, excluded women generally from understandings of an individualist subjectivity (Pateman, 1988; DiQuinzio, 1999; Urban Walker, 2000). Or put another way, such understandings of an autonomous individualist subjectivity do not allow a different, more inclusive, relational understanding of subjectivity to be recognised.

### *Autonomy: the paradox for women*

On the one hand the model of the autonomous late modern individual is held up for women as available to them; it is possible to have a 'life of their own'. On the other hand it appears to be taken out of their grasp as they still clearly remain responsible for the family, particularly familial relations and, therefore they are still expected to 'live for the family'. An important change affecting women's ability to take up the role of autonomous individual is the way that childhood is now understood. Modern mothers are expected to nurture the full physical, social and intellectual potential of the child through to adulthood. This belief has been termed the 'ideology of intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996). The 'child-centredness' of family life (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Jenks, 1996) that is now said to be the norm, creates a situation where the child is viewed as both the object and source of love and, in an uncertain world where relationships between adults appear to be less enduring than in the past, the love of and for the child, is seen as a constant in a changing social world (Jenks, 1996). This child-centredness within families has brought about a discourse of the 'child as project' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), as discussed earlier, and as I have argued, this notion has developed to include grandmothers who see the child as part of their 'extended family project'.

Many of the grandmothers' stories revealed the pleasure and fulfilment they gained vicariously through the success of the child. However, one of the major discourses applied to grandmothering in contemporary society is that of 'non-interference' (Kahana and Kahana, 1971; Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986). This reflects contemporary psychological thinking that mothers should bring their children up to be independent and self-reliant adults. As mothers they may respect their own children's autonomy as parents and feel that they should not interfere, whereas as 'sensitive' 'accessible' grandmothers they may wish to be closely

involved with their grandchildren. The discursive positions mentioned above, when applied to the participants' lives, show the difficulties experienced by grandmothers in constructing their sense of self while negotiating the complexities, ambiguities and tensions of the different relationships in their everyday lives.

As Beck-Gernsheim has argued women are in the position of 'no longer' but 'not yet' (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Is it possible for women as mothers and grandmothers to take up the position of late modernity's autonomous individual? The heart of the dilemma for women lies in the paradox that their case for greater autonomy and personal development rests on a model of individualism that *relies* on an institution (the family) to socialize individuals into becoming autonomous, self-reliant, independent 'good enough' citizens able to live productive lives (Somerville, 2000). Those who eventually *become* 'autonomous individuals' require the long term and dedicated care and nurturing of a mother, or mother figure, in order to become that independent self-reliant individual. The family therefore, operates on a value system antithetical to those liberal principles, that is, 'on those of ascribed authority, involuntary association, life-time membership and the subordination of the interests of individual members to those of the group' (Somerville, 2000:15-16). The role of the 'good enough' mother is one who is sensitive to the needs of her family (Winnicott, 1964) thus placing her in a dependent position, often materially, but also subjectively in the sense that her understanding of herself is born out of the successful raising of her children to become that independent, autonomous individual. Being ascribed the role of society's carers places women in relation to others *not* as the authors of their own biographies, but as the co-authors of others' biographies.

The problem for women, and for feminism in attempting to fight for



women's rights, has been the basing of women's rights on the great liberal principles of individualism, equality, meritocracy and democracy within a society that, while professing to adopt such principles as universal, continues to see the responsibility for the family and the domestic sphere as that of women (Somerville, 2000). Feminists have challenged those basic elements of individualism that ignore the gender blindness of such an ideal of subjectivity (Pateman, 1988; Fraser, 1989; Marshall, 1994). The dilemma for feminism is one of basing a call for women's equality and championing women's rights on an ideal of the self that does not recognize, or place an equal value on, a *relational* aspect of subjectivity.

### *The relational self*

Feminists have argued for ideas of selves that are 'relationally defined, mutually concerned, reciprocally trusting and complexly interdependent' (Urban Walker, 2000:98). In order to theorize mothering in more adequate terms, then, feminist theory has brought into the picture the fundamentals of female embodiment, of women's situations, experiences, and consciousness, and of women's social relations and contexts. In other words, 'the issue of mothering requires an account of embodiment, consciousness, experience, social relations, and social contexts that resists individualism and acknowledges difference' (DiQuinzio, 1999:13). Other feminists have called into question its mind/body dualism when the rational mind as is associated with the male and nature and the body with the female, subjectivity is defined in terms of a disembodied consciousness that in principle is capable of producing knowledge: This binary account of social relations privileges the independence and autonomy of subjectivity while devaluing its opposite, the dependent or relational: This account of subjectivity does not acknowledge the relevance of material, social, and ideological contexts (DiQuinzio, 1999). I contend that any understanding of female

subjectivity must bring together all of these elements in order to theorise mothering and I would add, grandmothering in more adequate terms.

### **The social self**

The autonomous late modern individual is said to be involved with the 'self as project' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995) leaving the relational or social self out of this model of the individual. The interaction between the private internal world of the 'individual' self and the public external world of the 'social' self are vital in understanding how older women as grandmothers make choices in their everyday lives and, how they come to make sense of who they are. Each may be thought about and spoken about separately, but each is experienced in the context of the other. Understanding the individual self and the social self are important in how we present ourselves to the world and how we decide the part we wish to play in that world. In aiming to understand what it means to be a grandmother, in terms of the relationship between individual identity and a social identity, it needs to be acknowledged that, as Jenkins (1996) argues, the two are intrinsically linked and dependent one on the other. Who we are needs to be validated by those we constantly come into contact with in our daily lives, therefore how we come to know ourselves depends a great deal on the interface between the self-image and the public image (Jenkins, 1996).

The work of Mead (1934) is useful here, as his theory of the self places great emphasis on the social self. We are social beings, in that each of us fashions a sense of self through our interaction with others. There is no clear dividing line between our sense of self and the selves of others. As Mead argues 'our own selves exist and enter as such into our experience only in so far as the selves of others exist and enter as such into our experience also' (Mead, 1934:164).

### *The reflexive self*

Mead's understanding of the self is a social self that is formed through interactions with others and through internal conversations in which the self is both subject and object of its own mental self-reflection (Jackson, 2003). Thus, 'the self is reflexive and reflexivity, or "reflexiveness" as Mead himself called it, is fundamental to our social being, to the relationship between mind, self and society' (Jackson, 2003:17).

It is by means of reflexiveness – the turning back of the experience of the individual upon himself (sic) – that the whole social process is brought into the experience of the individuals involved in it (Mead, 1934:134).

Mead's theory of the self therefore takes a different perspective on the notion of autonomy. Mead's notion of the self is of an autonomous individual but he argues for an agency of the self that acts and reflects on its own thoughts, feelings and attitudes *through* its interactions with and relation to significant others but, more than simply a relation of the self to others, it is the ability to take into the self and reflect on the viewpoint of the other that is important (Jackson, 2003). This, Mead argues is 'the initial step on the road to reflective thinking and autonomous agency' (Mead, 1934 quoted in Elliot, 2001:25). The ability to locate oneself within the social world of others and stand in another's shoes, requires the 'capacity for reflexivity and the ability of the self to act back upon itself' (Jackson, 2003:18).

I propose that reflexivity, in Mead's understanding of the term, is what women do. My data show that the women in this study have developed this skill to perfection. As grandmothers they constantly reflect on the self and how that self should behave while at the same time taking into account the viewpoints of others. Their experience of everyday life is

one of continually assessing situations from the position of other family members, while also considering their own needs. This process of deciding how the self should act complicates the decision-making process; otherwise decisions would be made, as an autonomous individual, simply in relation to one's own needs and desires. All of the grandmothers were skilled listeners and able to empathize with others in a variety of family and work situations. They were also very careful when it came to offering un-requested advice, either on relationships or child-care, making sure that they were not undermining the position of others. They were constantly trying to understand situations from the perspective of the other. Elliot (2001) in discussing Mead's theory of the self states:

The self for Mead is at once individuality and generality, agent and recipient, sameness and difference. Bluntly put, what this means is that the self is the agency through which individuals experience themselves in relation to others, but is also an object or fact dealt with by its individual owner as he or she sees fit...the crucial point for Mead is that such surveying of the territory of the self is always carried out with reference to the reactions of others. To possess a 'self' then, necessarily implies an ability to take one's actions, emotions and beliefs as a *unified* structure, viewed from the perspective of significant others, as others would view and interpret actions of the self. Seen from this angle, the self is a social product through and through, an outcome of social symbolic interaction – of emergent, ongoing creation, thinking, feeling, the building of attitude structures, the taking on of roles, all in a quest for *coherence* and orientated to the social world (Elliott, 2001 25-26, my emphasis).

In this piece of text I have emphasized the words, *unified* and *coherent* as these are important concepts, necessary to an understanding of the self. In order to have a sense of self that is coherent and unitary, it is necessary to have some inner sense of who we are without this core self fixing, and without essentialising the self. The notion of a reflexive self is sometimes considered to be essentialist on the grounds that, in

order for a relational reflexive self to exist, a core, fixed or pre-given 'I' is needed to do the work of reflexivity. As Jackson (2003) points out, in Mead's understanding of the self 'there is no self outside the social; it exists and comes into being only in relation the social "other", but the self is process not structure, 'always "in process" by virtue of its constant reflexivity' (Jackson, 2003:18).

### *Fragmented or unified sense of self*

Postmodern theorising puts forward the notion of a fragmented, decentered self constantly in flux. However, while it could be argued that part of what the grandmothers in this study experience is what has been theorised as a 'post-modern' understanding of the self, I follow Jackson and others who propose a self that is experienced as a unified, coherent self experienced as an ongoing process. Post-modern theories of the self argue that being constantly responsive to the demands of others and having to accomplish several tasks at once results in a sense of self that is fractured, fragmentary and unstable. However, multi-tasking is something that women have always done. Women are well known to have this skill and housework has long been recognized as fragmentary (Oakley, 1974). The women in this study are perfect examples of this ability to multi-task, to place themselves in the shoes of others, and to integrate the needs of the self with that of others, while constantly adapting and fitting in around constantly changing demands. As Jackson and Scott (2002) argue 'fragmentation of demand does not necessarily equate with fragmentation of response' (Jackson and Scott, 2002:14). In discussing the problems with postmodern ideas of fragmentation Jackson and Scott go on to argue that:

For some postmodernists, however, the dislocation of discourse from any determinable social or historical context can produce a vision of the self so decentred, fractured and contingent that there is no sense

of self as ongoing, but only one in which fragments of the self float free from any anchorage (Jackson and Scott, 2002:14).

The respondents in this study clearly have many aspects to their understanding of who they are, however, following Jackson and Scott, I wish to argue here for the importance of understanding the difference between a fixed core self and a unitary sense of self. The idea that the self is not fixed and unchanging is useful in understanding the lives of the women in this study, however, the suggestion that a core-self may be lacking, or that the self is not experienced as ongoing, is not. As Flax argues, postmodernists 'seem unaware of the possible differences between a core self and a unitary one' (Flax, 1990:210). 'The lack of a unitary self, however, cannot mean no self at all – the non-self is nonsense' (Jackson and Scott, 2002:14). I have adopted a feminist life-course perspective that incorporates an understanding of the self as one that continues to adapt and change *throughout* the life-course. The self is experienced as 'fluid' and ongoing and a knowledge of elements of a 'stable' core self continues throughout a life course. As Estes et al argue in relation to an ageing self:

A degree of both stability and fluidity is necessary for the creation of identities that ageing adults can comfortably inhabit. If there is a perceived excess of fixedness, people feel entrapped, but if there is an absence, people experience the world as frighteningly unstable, if there is an excess of fluidity, life becomes unpredictable and identities fragmented. However, if there is too little, creativity and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances become threatened (Estes et al., 2003:26)

What needs to be recognised is the active, self-reflexive *interaction* between different aspects of the self, experienced as a self in process, but carrying with it a continuous sense of self as on-going. Lawler (2000) identifies three aspects of the self at work in (re)producing the self, that is, the inherited self, the social self, and the intrinsic self. I

have argued the case for a social self and a unitary sense of, what she calls the intrinsic self differently from Lawler,<sup>40</sup> but I would like to consider her notion of the inherited self and the part that plays in helping to maintain a sense of self as on-going.

### *The inherited self*

The inherited self is constituted within family and wider kinship networks. Genetically we inherit physical attributes from our ancestors, but we also recognise inherited family traits in our behavior and psychology. Blood relations are important, as Schneider suggests, such relations are 'real' or 'true' and cannot be dissolved unlike legal ties. The blood relationship he argues 'is culturally defined as being an objective fact of nature, of fundamental significance and capable of having profound effects, and its nature cannot be determined or changed' (Schneider, 1968 quoted in Lawler, 2000:58). The recognition of family traits, and the passing down of family customs and family history, are experienced as part of what constitutes the self. Having roots is important in that where we come from is vital to knowing who we are and to feeling that we belong. Having a history is something that marks and places us within something that has a substance, a past present and a future. Particularly for the older women in this study, feeling part of something that will continue after they have gone was important in providing an ongoing sense of self, a kind of immortality. As Lawler found in her study of mothers and daughters:

Through the notion of an inherited self, the women conceptualized themselves and their daughters as firmly tied within the kin system.

The existence of this inherited material within the self suggests a fixity to the self through a tie with the past which *seems* unalterable. In many

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<sup>40</sup> Lawler uses psychoanalytic theory here to explain her notion of an 'intrinsic self', I am not, however, attempting to follow Lawler's understanding of an intrinsic self in the same way, but adapting her notion of the inherited self to add weight to my theorising of the self as ongoing.

ways, this is the antithesis of the contemporary 'ideal type' – the individual who is 'free' to 'choose' (Rose, 1991, 1992b; Strathern, 1992a and b). The links to other kin undermine the status of the 'individual', enclosed and bounded self, while the ties to the past constrain the person through self-characteristics which are inborn, rather than made (Lawler, 2000:59).

The importance of recognition of shared characteristics can be seen as not only fixing individuals but also, through the process of a conscious, reflexive self, as providing individuals with knowledge of their ancestors against which their own selfhood can be assessed. As Lawler argues, recognition involves some kind of agency in the activity of making the relation between other kin and the self, leading to a situation where certain characteristics can be 'chosen' and valued, or they can be feared and avoided: 'recognition, then, stands between absolute fixity and absolute choice: it mediates the apparent fixity of kin relations on the one hand, and the possibility of 'choice' on the other' (Lawler, 2000:60). As Strathern (1992) argues, it is what we *make* of the past that is important.

By understanding the self as an on-going process throughout the life-course, it is recognized that the past, either inherited or otherwise, does not wholly determine present behavior. We constantly reflect back upon ourselves re-visiting past experiences and bringing them to the present, reworking and re-engaging with the past from our experience in the now and projecting this out into the future. The self as reflexive, and the capacity to stand outside one's self and locate one's self in relation to others, is a skill that women have developed in many cases better than men.

As I have argued above, the notion of the 'reflexive' self as Beck in



Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994) theorises the self, is not Mead's social self, but one that individualises the subject. So, can such an understanding of the self be applied to grandmothers in this study? I would contend that they are 'reflexive' in Beck's sense, in that they appear to accept reflexivity and individualisation as something that is normative, but they do not appear to have applied such an understanding to themselves in quite the same way. Returning to the data, it is worth repeating the way in which Emma understands the self in order to illustrate this point. In this statement she shows a kind of dual understanding:

*Emma: I think probably the most important is your own sense of identity. I think it is probably most important and I think in that everything else is built upon that. I think being thoughtful about your own kind of issues and working a lot out gets a lot of stuff out of the way really. So I think you can probably be more kind of calm and reassuring and you know, a grandmother that can kind of, like affirm the right attributes in their grandchildren. ... my purpose as a grandmother is to be supportive to my daughter, objective enough to kind of like.....be able to speak with my grandson and treat him with respect and concern and you know kind of removed enough from him not to be emotionally embroiled with him [italics are my emphasis]. (Emma, aged 42).*

Emma displays here an element of 'self as project', as her words, 'your own sense of identity' seem to indicate. She clearly reflects upon herself and wishes to make changes through 'working a lot out', but what is important is that she seems to incorporate such a notion of individualisation and late modernity's autonomous individual into her sense of self for the purpose of *helping her family*, she says: 'my purpose is to be supportive to my daughter' (which extends to include her grandson).

Many of the participants appear to adopt the 'child as project' or 'the family as project' in relation to their children and grandchildren and, by

doing this could be said live their life vicariously *through* the success of their children and grandchildren. The satisfaction the grandmothers gained from the part they played in the successful development of their grandchildren is clearly an important part of their experience. They accept the notion that successful [grand]mothering is to provide the 'correct' input to enable the child to become the self-reliant, autonomous individual who will then move outside the boundaries of the home, becoming a 'good enough citizen', living a successful 'life of their own'.

At times the two aspects of the self, that is, 'living for the family' and 'living for one's self', are experienced as conflicting and personal sacrifices detracting from a 'life of one's own', may sometimes have to be made. However, in most cases the women in this study accepted that this was just 'how it is', adjustments have to be made, certain desires need to be put on hold, but 'a life of one's own' could not be lived out at the expense of losing the often stated gains from the relational aspect of their everyday family lives. For the grandmothers in this study to discount the needs of their families would be to deny a major part of who they are.

However, no one script can cover a lifetime. During the life course several roles are played out, some more important than others, and all are influenced by one's connection to significant others experienced within several segments of time. By applying a feminist life course perspective to the data (Bernard et al., 2000), linking backwards and forwards in time and placing women's experience at the centre, a clearer picture of what it means to be an older woman as a grandmother begins to emerge. Such a perspective not only reveals the 'interrelatedness of careers or role trajectories across the life course' (Merrill, 1997:17) but also the 'temporal' nature of care giving in relation

to women's lives, and the agency of individual women to consciously make choices. In understanding *who* we are as individuals we consciously revisit and reflect upon earlier experiences which are then brought into the present to be re-absorbed as we adjust and adapt to the *now* of our everyday lives. Identity is neither fixed nor experienced in isolation from others, but is woven together from the past and the present and taken forward as individuals hope and plan for the future. Individuals also move in and out of the lives of others, taking with them certain aspects of relationships and discarding others.

An individual is also set within the context of their particular culture and social world with its stereotypical ideals, norms and values, but individuals do not necessarily follow the kinds of stereotypes associated with their particular age or social background. There is always a place for resistance and stereotypes, which are not always an accurate representation of certain groups in society, can be rejected. Stereotypes tend to lag behind rather than reflect the actuality of how groups of individuals behave. The cultural stereotype of a grandmother as a bespectacled grey haired old lady, or the granny associated with Benidorm and Saga Holidays, bears no resemblance to the women interviewed in this study and none of the women identified with such images. How to be a grandmother is something each individual woman has negotiated for herself set within an arguably ageist society, within the context of her epoch, her own personal history, her family time, her own particular circumstances and the options available to her. Timing, and the passing of time, as well as the use of time are further important aspects that influence and are influenced by our understanding of the self.

## Negotiating the meaning of grandmotherhood

I propose that the experiences of growing older, for the women in this study, do not necessarily fit into pessimistic and prescriptive models of ageing neither, as I have argued, do they relate to contemporary notions of late modernity's autonomous individual. Their lives do not tally with rigid, linear definitions of time and decline. I would argue, as Salmon (1985) does that:

The meaning we give to human development, to the course of human life, is itself socially negotiated. To realize this is to see the particular forms which life generally takes in our own society, not as fixed and immutable, but as historically and culturally relative – as open, potentially, to social reconstruction, to the development of other, perhaps richer forms (Salmon quoted in Davies, 1990:185).

An identity that is associated with ageing, in this case becoming a grandmother, does not follow a script, but develops and is continually in process. As Morganroth Gullette (1997) states when speaking about possessing an age identity:

I'm not *finding* my identity. I never mislaid it; it wasn't something fixed early that could be mislaid in adulthood, as if through carelessness. That metaphor of 'finding' is not trivially wrong; it is powerfully ageist. A pop encapsulation of Freud's master narrative of decline, it implies that everything important happened in childhood and that as adults we have no role in producing a self except to correct early mistakes. It also implies that once we 'find' identity, like a found object, it will stay essentially the same. On the contrary, mine maintains itself and grows, doing all its inevitable things: discarding unwanted identities, building on older ones accretively, producing diverting interactions, anthologizing its stories. If it seems to be telling me the meaning of time passing, actually I've been constructing it. It is always mine to remake, but it wasn't truly 'mine' until I had actually done some remaking and knew that I had (Gullette, 1997:65, emphasis in the original).

Such an understanding of an ageing self takes account of agency, that is, proposing a reflective self actively composing the self. It recognises a sense of self that is ongoing, continually in process. Just as younger women do not now have any rules to follow about how their lives should evolve, so the older women in this study appear not to be following a set of pre-determined ideas about how their lives should be in mid to later life. Although the family remains central to their lives, they are negotiating their own way within the constraints and conditions of their particular social worlds. This way remains closely *connected* to the family but this does not mean that their lives are totally *fixed* or without personal choice.

In opposition to the late modern model of the individual I propose that grandmothers develop an identity that is complex, fluid, actively and reflexively composed throughout their life course, and as such, the self is multi-layered and adaptable. Elements of the self may at times be experienced in conflict with, and at other times compatible with, the dominant Western understanding of the individual. Individualisation, as discussed above, emphasises independence, personal growth and self-determination as ideals associated with the expected developmental path of children into adulthood. However, such an understanding of the individual can be at odds with a grandmother's need for connectedness. The tensions and ambiguities between the two seemingly opposing notions of the self are part of what older women as grandmothers have to negotiate their way through in everyday life.

### *Multiple Times*

The data reveal that time as experienced by the grandmothers in this study is compacted and multi-layered. Women's time is often broken up and fragmented with women being able to carry out several tasks at the

same time. A grandmother baking scones with her grandchild may appear to be just doing that, preparing something for them to eat, but at the same time she may be making this into a game for her grandchild, she may use the opportunity to teach the concepts of weighing and measuring, she may be planning ahead for the next day's packed school lunch and therefore helping her daughter, she may also be gaining pleasure for herself in the closeness of the relationship she is building with her grandchild and the memories she is creating for herself and the grandchild. Along with multi-tasking, multiple times can coexist. For a grandmother, time with her grandchild can bring back memories of time with her own children, or her own childhood.

Each generation has its own understanding of its time. Grandmothers move in and out of these different worlds with ease. They may be caring for an elderly parent one moment, caring for a small child another, and understanding the needs of a partner the next. These different threads of time are woven into a sense of self that embraces and includes rather than separates and excludes. The threads that the 'I' weaves together to make the particular fabric of the self, the 'me' is unique to each woman, but the threads she uses are durable, flexible, multi-textured, multi-coloured, some thick, some thin, and some, such as the raw materials of the warp and the weft, may be inherited and constraining either genetically or environmentally.

Some threads may be strong and continue through life, always clearly visible, while others will become submerged and still others will cease to be used. The overall pattern, what gets left in or introduced and what gets taken out or ignored, is up to the 'I' of the individual. Some patterns will be intricately detailed, some aesthetically sophisticated, while others will be robust and hard wearing, but each will have its own beauty. Sometimes there will be tears that have to be darned and mended or the edges may become frayed. Within the overall fabric

separate and distinct patterns may emerge with only tentative links to each other, while other patterns will merge so tightly as to be hardly distinguishable as a design.

The complexity and the density of the patterns of the lives of the grandmothers in this study is very different from the patterns that emerge from the lives of the majority of men. It is the weaver of the self, the 'I' of the individual, that decides on the 'me' that is the pattern shown to the world. Understanding grandmothers' lives to be patterned in such a way helps to explain why women's understandings of the self are so different from men's. Woven into the fabric of life for many women will be family threads of knowledge and understanding, feelings and emotions, familiar designs that emerge as recognisable family patterns.

My findings clearly show that the women in this study work hard to preserve the continuity of such patterns, as an ongoing mark of their family and the self in the world. For many generations of women their role in the family will have been their only means of achieving this objective. For the women in this study, the continuity of the self through their families will not be their only means of leaving their mark in the world, nonetheless it remains central to their sense of self.

*Grandmothers at the intersection of the 'I' of late modernity's individual and the 'we' of the extended family*

Where then, does this locate grandmothers in relation to the 'I' of late modernity's individual? Whereas Beck-Gernsheim (2002) suggests that women are in a position of 'no longer but not yet', I would argue that they are in a position of 'not only but also'. The data appears to place the women in this study at the intersection between these two understandings of the self. As grandmothers the women in this study

experience the two perspectives in different ways, that is, they apply the ideal of the late modern individual to others in their families, but experience their sense of self in relation to the needs of others. Potentially, this can be theorised as a location in neither place or in both places at the same time. The grandmothers' sense of self can be understood as an intricate blending together of two understandings of the self, not experienced in isolation one from the other, but as two facets of the self used in response to each situation as it arises, making the best of any given situation. I take the position that being located in neither place allows an individual to move between fixed points taking from both at will, but not living in either. This does not need to be experienced as a fragmented subjectivity or as an excluded self, but as a place from which to take a path of one's own. Being in such a place is indeed the result of gendered processes at work which allow a different perspective; being located at a particular place in the life course also gives a changed viewpoint of one's life.

As grandmothers women are positioned differently from their location as mothers. They are more removed from both their children and grandchildren and from such a position, they are sometimes able to see the whole picture more clearly. Their location in their particular life course can provide a different perspective from which to view a life. Being reflexive is something that women have always done. They are able to put themselves in the place of others, see the world from the position of another: they are able to constantly adapt to changing situations and competing demands and they do all of this without losing their own sense of self. Such a self is actively and reflexively composed, woven together from many elements of the self, and experienced as a more integrated, denser sense of self, one that is affected by and acts upon what they do, and how they live their lives. At times this merging together of the different elements of the self may provide a satisfactory unified subjectivity, while at other times the



various parts compete against each other causing a fragmented less cohesive sense of self.

What it means to *be* a grandmother is therefore a complex, multi-layered, fluid and ever changing experience. It is the women's subjective experience of this complex and fluid mix of shared and competing knowledge, that help determine the pleasures, tensions and ambiguities of what it means to *be* a grandmother. I maintain, however, that the dominant discourses of what it is to be an older woman, a mother and a grandmother are only part of the forces that go together to make up the experience of what it means to *be* a grandmother. The diverse material, demographic and social changes that each individual woman has to understand and negotiate for herself are of equal importance. The reflexivity demonstrated by the participants has shown that each individual has a level of understanding of the influences at work, therefore the agency of each individual woman is a crucial factor that must be recognised. The level of importance given to issues, while set within the context of our everyday lives, is personal, and therefore, the real meaning given to the script at any one time, and the acting out of the performance, are finally under the direction of the individual.

*Grandmotherhood: experienced as a denser sense of self*

The data shows that for this group of women as grandmothers, continuity of the family and an ongoing sense of self are experienced in unison. As I have argued, grandmothers' sense of self is often experienced vicariously through their connection to their children and grandchildren. They respond 'reflexively' (Beck et al., 1994) to social change, but they are also in the process of creating and directing a script for their own lives by developing the ongoing story of what it means to be an older woman and a grandmother at the beginning of the

twenty first century. The time that they live in, their family time and the time that is *their* individual time, interact with each other and tensions have to be resolved on many levels. At certain times grandmothers in this study are active agents of 'a do-it-yourself life history', but at the same time they remain strongly committed to the *continuity* of, and their *connectedness* to, family life. I have argued that grandmothers manage to incorporate elements of the 'I' of late modernity's individual with that of a social, relational self, producing a more flexible, integrated, inclusive, and denser sense of self. I contend, however, that their understanding of time is compacted by their relation to the times of others and, thus, further contributes to a denser, ongoing sense of self.

## Chapter 8

### What it Means to be a Grandmother:

#### Living a Life of One's Own *in Relation to Others*'

My reasons for beginning this thesis were as much to do with my own personal wish to understand what it means to be a grandmother as they were to understand the wider social implications of family change. On reflection, I can now see that I feared that becoming a grandmother might limit my aspirations for personal change, to live a life of my own after years of living my life in relation to the needs of my family. I also resisted having the title 'grandmother' attached to me as I felt it might label me as 'old' and 'past it' at a time when I was hoping to embark on a new aspect of my life. My rationale, therefore, began from a personal interest but extended to a need to develop a more adequate understanding of how middle-aged and older women might identify with and negotiate the role of grandmother; to discover what it means to be a grandmother, how being a grandmother might fit with the rest of a woman's life and how the experience of being a grandmother might vary over time. My thesis, to some extent, then, maps out a personal journey in coming to terms with being a grandmother while at the same time bringing the stories of my participants into the public arena and making their very substantial and complex lives visible. In bringing my thesis to a conclusion I will first summarise my research findings, second, reflect on the possibilities for future research and my own location in the research process and third, show how my research might be utilised in contributing to knowledge in the fields of gerontology, family studies and women's studies.

## **Challenging myths**

I acknowledge that the research findings cannot, of course, be taken as representative of the experience of grandmothering generally, but what my research does do is challenge some of the myths and frequently held assumptions about grandmothers. The first myth to be dispelled was that grandmothers are necessarily old women. They may be 'older' women but, as the average age of becoming a grandmother was forty-seven, the women in my study were middle-aged rather than old when they first became grandmothers. However, as being a grandmother may cover thirty or forty years, in effect, many women will experience grandmotherhood in old, old age. Although many of the women reported feeling that they were not old enough to be a grandmother, the actual experience of grandmothering was reported as invigorating and helping to keep the participants feeling young.

The second myth is that grandmothers are an homogeneous group. All of my participants were white, they all came from the same region, there were not any huge disparities in their income levels and they all had some connection with their grandchildren but, despite these shared experiences, for the most part it could not be said that a common experience of being a grandmother emerged. My approach was to adopt a feminist life course perspective, that is, to bring the everyday lives of the participants, their individual and family history, the constraints of wider society, gender and ageing into the analysis which allowed the diversity and complexity of this role and its fluidity over time to emerge. Adopting a feminist life course perspective, then, has been a useful tool through which to identify the macro and micro levels of society that, together with personal, historical and family time, intersect with gender and age in the construction of the self and what it means to be a grandmother.

### **Contemporary kinship relations: Continuity versus change**

The experience and practice of what it means to be a grandmother at the turn of the century is both subject to and affects social change. However, my findings are that there are many elements of family life that continue from one generation to another. Contemporary kinship relations are an active mixing and matching of traditional aspects of family life – *continuity* – while adapting to contemporary notions of an increasingly individualised society - *social change*. There appears therefore to be a tension between a kind of social conformity to traditional notions of female identity and self-expression more attributable to contemporary ideas of post-modern living (Biggs, 1999; Urban Walker, 2000). My findings show that the practice of *doing* grandmothing and the experience of *being* a grandmother are negotiated between each individual woman's personal biography, the timing of family events, her location in the life-course, her age cohort and the context of the dominant social norms and practices past and present, and her response to social change as lived out by her family. What it means to be a grandmother is therefore a complex, multi-layered, fluid and ever changing experience that carries with it an ongoing integrated sense of self. Her sense of self is one that values depth of meaning rather than surface meaning (Biggs, 1999) and values heteronomy rather than autonomy as the only goal of the self (Urban Walker, 2000).

Table 10 attempts to summarise the factors that my research has identified as impacting upon the experience and practice of older women as grandmothers. The women in this study differ in terms of age, class, cohort, working life, education and family circumstances contributing to the multidimensional and fluid nature of this complex family role. As I have argued grandmothing is a fluid situation with, at certain times, one factor or set of factors being more important than others. However, all of the levels mentioned below are factors that each

grandmother has to negotiate in order to understand the particular meaning being a grandmother has for her.

**Table 10 The Impact of Gender and Age on Grandmothers' Lives**

<b>Impact of Gender and Age</b>	
<i>Macro Level</i> <i>Wider social context of the self</i>	<i>Micro Level</i> <i>The grandmother's self in a familial, personal context</i>
Institutionalised prejudices and restrictions, and the gendered and 'gerontized'* power relations within the wider society	Personal biography, age cohort, experience of childhood, work, marriage, motherhood and grandmotherhood
Economic and social policies, pension rights, maternity leave, inequality in pay and job opportunities	Expectations and understandings of age and gender roles within the family
Social class, economic & material conditions, housing, environment, education, health	Personal health, past and present
Social attitudes and dominant discourses, norms and values relating to gender and ageing	Personal experience and expectations of ageing and of grandmotherhood
Cultural change, changing working practices and the way relationships are understood	Working life past and present and future expectations
<b>The grandmother's understanding of the self: relational, reflexive, connected</b>	

\* This term is one used by Biggs (1993)

Table 10 illustrates how gender and age, at the macro and micro levels of society, impact on older women's lives thus influencing their understanding of the self. As many of these factors change over time

this social self is also subject to change, adapting, responding and reflecting on the self and significant others. As my findings have shown grandmothers are extremely adept at being 'reflexive', that is putting themselves in the shoes of another. My findings have demonstrated the relational nature and connectedness, what I have described as the *density*, of older women's sense of self.

### **Gender, age, power relations and social change**

As has been previously discussed, when looking at the relationship between gender and the family, my view follows Morgan (1996) who suggests that family life is a place where gender roles are constructed and performed, sometimes obscured, but also modified. Changes within the wider society impact on families, but also individual needs and desires first acted out in family life, bring about changes in society (Davies, 1991). Family life is not fixed but fluid, both influenced by and impacting on the wider society. Family and gender are often inter-linked with the family being a major site of the exploitation of women's unpaid labour as mothers and housekeepers (Oakley, 1974; Oakley, 1976), and patriarchal relations typified by the suppression of the needs of the female to that of the male and the requirements of capitalism (Walby, 1990); however, I would add to this that in what has been described as a child-centred society (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Jenks, 1996), the needs of children increasingly subordinate those of women as both mothers and grandmothers.

In common with other research, my findings are that, despite many structural, social and demographic changes, grandmothers' involvement in, and commitment to, family life is far from in decline. Rather it has increased (Bornat et al., 1999; Dench and Thomson, 1999). In response to social change my participants are easing some of the pressures experienced in today's changing family forms and practices,

characterised in particular, by rising divorce rates and women's working practices (Zeilig, 2000; Attias-Donfut and Segalen, 2002).

Grandmothers' intensified participation in the lives of their grandchildren has occurred despite the fact that many of them are either in full-time or part-time work. The 'double burden' experienced by women when housework is combined with paid work is well recognised and also applies to many of this group of older women. Those women with teenage daughters who are mothers, experienced what I have termed '*double mothering*'. For those grandmothers who were acting as primary carers for their grandchildren this involved an extended period of surrogate mothering. Many grandmothers experienced a *continuation of mothering*, often expressed as an understanding of themselves as 'second' mothers to their grandchildren with, as I have argued in Chapter Six, their understandings of grandmotherhood embedded in the dominant discourses surrounding motherhood.

### **Continuity**

Understanding grandmotherhood as a continuation of motherhood demonstrates how many aspects of 'family life', particularly for women, remain the same. My data challenge the assumption that changing family forms and practices necessarily equate with a *decline* in the value placed on being part of a family. The data show that the role of a grandmother in the extended family, far from being 'dead' is alive and well. As Kate, one of the grandmothers commented, the idea of the extended family breaking down is unfounded:

No. I mean, the whole idea of the extended family breaking down is just nonsense. You know the nuclear family might be breaking down, but grandmothers are still there! You know, that's for sure<sup>^</sup>. (Kate, aged 55).

Family composition and family practices vary, and clearly the nuclear family relations might not be as lasting as they once were, however, an



ethic of care clearly exists between family members. In everyday life the importance of 'the family' in the sense of something that is recorded and placed on public view, and 'family life' as something that people *do*, still survives. What is most striking in the respondent's stories is, first, the immense *amount* of practical and 'emotion work' they provide for wider kin and, second, the *continued importance* they place on kinship relations.

The grandmothers' ability to recognise the needs of the wider family is in contrast to the much theorised rise in individualism and the so-called 'project of the self' which is said to mean that there is a lessening of moral ties that bind individuals and groups in contemporary society (Beck, 1992; Oppenheimer, 1994). However, as I have argued in chapter 7 the social changes that have taken place in modern times are all gendered processes (Pateman, 1988) and, therefore the ways in which older women as grandmothers make sense of and negotiate their lives is influenced by the gendered power relations which govern social life and the particular personal and historical context of their everyday family life. Family life has become more complex with more choices, particularly for women, but the discourses surrounding [grand]motherhood remain constant and it does not appear that family life is becoming significantly more egalitarian. Men do not appear to be taking significantly more responsibilities in family life with the result that many of the changes that are occurring increasingly mean that family life is becoming more 'feminized' (Bornat et al., 1999). My data appear to add weight to this argument. In most of the families it was the women who organised the childcare, the housework, shopping, fetching and carrying children to and from school and after school activities. In over half of cases, in the middle generation there was not a man to call on for help. That is not to say that expectations of independence and equality do not exist alongside expectations of gendered responsibilities, but even under conditions where family change has

disturbed expected norms of family life, it is women who keep family life going, and as I have discussed, it is in many cases the centrality of the child in family life rather than patriarchy, that now subordinate the needs of women.

### **The child as a cause of women's subordination**

The centrality of the child in contemporary family life goes without question. A significant factor, demonstrated through the grandmothers' stories, is that many of them appear to be living their lives, in part, vicariously through the 'child as project'. They may view the prospect of investing in their [grand]children as a preferable 'career' option if other options available to them outside the home appear inherently uninteresting and unrewarding. Under these conditions being a [grand]mother for many women becomes a legitimate choice and, combined with part-time work, gives them the option to be involved in both worlds:

As long as women bear children, nurse them, feel responsible for them, and see them as an essential part of their lives, children remain wished-for 'obstacles' in the occupational competition, as well as temptations to a conscious decision *against* economic autonomy and a career. In this way, the lives of women are pulled back and forth by this contradiction between liberation from and reconnection to the old ascribed roles. This is also reflected in their consciousness and behavior. They flee from housework to a career and back again, and attempt in different phases of their lives to hold together the diverging conditions of their life 'somehow' through contradictory decisions (Beck, 1992:112).

Adding weight to this argument, the child has become both the *object* and the *source of love*, in the sense of filling a lack in ourselves (Giddens, 1992). My data appear to show that there is some truth in this notion, for younger as well as older women in this study. The

demographic facts - that younger women are more likely to be divorced or choose to live alone - would appear to demonstrate that they are becoming increasingly disenchanted with their 'romantic' relationships. As Ulrich Beck points out, although partners come and go, the child has become the source of the last remaining 'irrevocable, unexchangeable primary relationship' (Beck, 1992:118). The 'missing' factor in many women's lives may be replaced by an intimate and absorbing relationship with their children. The patriarchal system whereby women are subordinated to the needs of men may be eroding but, for many women, this situation is being replaced by subordination to the needs of their children. This, for many women, seems to be a situation that is set to continue and will perhaps mean that younger women too will carry on the caring role when they too become grandmothers.

### **The complexity of the self**

The women in this study emerge not as passive individuals oppressed by the burden of caring for others but as active agents, often struggling to help and support their families, in order to effect positive change for those families. Caring relationships are fluid. At times they may be experienced as empowering and at times they may be felt to be oppressive. The person carrying out the caring can feel recognised and cared about through the practice of caring for others. Reciprocity and feelings of self worth, either through living vicariously through the lives of others or seeing the benefits to their families, through providing support, featured in all of the women's stories. What is needed is a broader, more fluid understanding of what it means 'to care about' others, and to 'provide care'. We need to recognise differences in experiences rather than taking a fixed view of the care women provide as a 'burden' to them or interpreting this role as necessarily oppressive. A woman's experience of caring is mediated through multiple and potentially conflicting identities that can and do coexist. Although family

life has undoubtedly undergone significant change, it often goes unnoticed just how many aspects of family life, particularly for women, remain the same. The women in this study are responding to the times that they are living in, but responding in a way that makes sense to them as individual women within the context of the 'historicity and particularities of their lived worlds' (Smith, 1988). [Grand]mothers experience their lives in *relation* to others (Jerrrome, 1994; Jerrrome, 1996), often living their lives vicariously through the lives of significant others. They make time for and give time to others. The self understood in this way, is mutually experienced (Gilligan, 1982).

The women viewed in this way can be seen not so much as authors of their own biographies but as co-authors of *others'* biographies. Older women as grandmothers develop a different sense of self experienced through their lives being lived in relation to others and to other times in their life course. Being located in such a place gives a different perspective and a different understanding of the self, taken from different times, different places and different relationships. Adopting a life course perspective and situating women at the centre of the analysis reveals the possibility of a diversity of identities, coexisting, merging and weaving together to produce an unbounded, integrated, denser sense of self. This perspective helps to further our understanding of what it means to be an older woman as a grandmother at this point in time.

### **Reflections on the research process**

Two questions concerned me from the beginning. The first was whether younger women are gaining some level of independence at the expense of their mothers' generation and, secondly, I asked whether younger women will choose to care for their grandchildren in the same way that their mothers have done. The data do not provide me with conclusive answers to these questions. However, a study of three

generations of the same family would gain different perspectives and perhaps provide further understanding of these issues. A long-term study would also provide information on how generations interact over time and perhaps show how different times and various locations throughout the life course produce diverse relationships and afford distinctive experiences for the individuals concerned. The views of grandchildren over time would also give an added dimension to the understanding of kinship relations.

My own sample was rooted in a particular locale and was thus limited by the demographic features of the region as well as by the individual biographies of the women. I talked to twenty grandmothers living in the mainly rural area of North Yorkshire. The majority of my participants have lived in their present homes for long periods of time and therefore continuity and stability within the community was a feature of many of their lives. The sample offered no opportunity to explore ethnic differences. A sample that included grandmothers from different ethnic backgrounds, residing in an urban location could have broadened the data, as could the inclusion of more professional women and divorced or separated women. A larger sample drawn from these areas would have given a more extensive picture of what it means to be a grandmother.

Reflecting on the research process it has occurred to me that the observations I made while in the company of my respondents provided important information that was valuable in understanding the experience and practice of grandmothers. Time spent in informal interaction, having cups of tea with the grandmothers, enabled me to observe the timetables on kitchen and fridge doors; the notion of family photographs as a shrine also came to me in this way. This added information helped me to understand more fully the part that family life played in these women's lives. On occasion, seeing how they interacted

with their grandchildren and partners provided yet another dimension to the data that the interviews tapes could not. I conclude that participant observation in family situations such as these could have added another valuable dimension to the picture. In retrospect, if I had factored participant observation into my research methodology I feel that this might have revealed some of the multi-tasking that women carry out and given some insight into how they operate within their familial relations.

It was not until I was part way through my analysis that the issue of how grandmothers' utilised *time* began to emerge as an important feature of their stories. The gendered nature of time and women's relational temporal experience to time emerged as significant issues following a combination of my observations of how they live their lives and their recounted experiences. If there had been time for me to go back to the participants and ask them to keep a 'time diary' recording their daily routines, I feel this would have added to the richness of the data and given further interesting insights into the multi-faceted and fluid nature of women's relation to time and kin.

As I have discussed in the methodology chapter, when planning the research process I was of the opinion that my closeness to the research subject provided me with a level of authenticity and empathy with the participants, a factor which was likely to add to the possibility of gaining richer data. My hope was always that the interview process would contribute something to the women's lives by providing them with the opportunity to have their stories heard. My concern as a feminist has always been to empower women and open up choices and opportunities for women. However, my embeddedness in my work as a feminist also caused me some difficulties.

Early on in the research process I was aware that the data were providing me with information that I found surprising and, in some ways, this concerned me. I was surprised that all of the grandmothers reported that they gained pleasure and satisfaction from the relationship with their grandchildren despite the pressures and, as I saw it, the 'sacrifices' they made. I had not expected the *extent* of their devotion to the continuity of extended family life and the lack of overt expressions of dissatisfaction. I had 'expected' the women to articulate more displeasure considering the demands placed on their time, energy and resources by their families.

On reflection, I can now see that it was my location as a feminist and an older woman attempting to create a 'life of my own' as a PhD student influenced my way of thinking. The assumptions I had made about their lives were based on my feminist ideals and I did not recognise my 'blind spot' in relation to my personal responses, as a mother and a grandmother, to my own changing family situations. Although I had theorised about adopting a self-reflexive research process, I had failed to see just how much my own location as a feminist academic had coloured my view. Nor did I understand how *being* a grandmother myself would be very different from my expectations. I had not realised that I had also absorbed some of the myths surrounding grandmotherhood. I can now see that I had uncritically adopted feminist notions that describe caring as a 'burden' and as maintaining women in a dependent position, either to partners or the state, and contributing to women's oppression (Finch and Groves, 1980; Finch and Groves, 1983; Graham, 1983). I was therefore seeing the work grandmothers do in terms of sacrificing their own needs for those of others. In becoming aware of my reactions and expectations I was reminded that all knowledge is situated knowledge and that there is no universal position in relation to caring, or any other situation. This has been eloquently written about by disabled feminist Morris (1989; 1991;

1993) and black feminists Childers and hooks (1990). The relationship my participants have with their grandchildren and families is, in most cases, characterised by interdependence and reported to be a reciprocal exchange of either practical or emotional support.

The data show that caring for family members is not generally understood as a burden. Criticisms of family members were rare, and thinking of 'caring for others' in terms of personal sacrifices was not the norm. Although several of the women clearly *had* given up their own needs at times, what they reported as *significant*, was the satisfaction that their families had benefited from their efforts. This is what they received in return. This form of reciprocity, as I have argued, could be said to contain a kind of 'caring capital' that can be cashed in at some future date, when it is most needed.

Caring can be, by its nature, an ambiguous experience. When discussing their health, many of the grandmothers reported that they had indeed suffered from stress related health problems in caring for their families. Others had given up ideas of career changes or cut down on work commitments in order to meet the needs of their family situations. This information often contradicted earlier statements where they had denied making any personal sacrifices when caring for their kin. However, even those who reported making sacrifices saw their contribution in helping their families to flourish as 'worth it'. Their families came first.

### **Contribution to the field of knowledge**

By analysing my participants' stories, my research contributes to the field of knowledge in Women's Studies, Family Studies and Gerontology. It provides an overview of the experience and practice of grandmothering, the various factors influencing this experience and, an attempt to theorise the intersections of gender, age, time and identity in



terms of what it *means* to be a grandmother. My study adds weight to existing research that acknowledges the continued importance of wider kinship relations and raises some of the important issues that must be addressed if any serious attention is to be given by society in general, and social policy makers in particular, to the needs of older women as grandmothers. My thesis gives a voice to middle-aged and older women as grandmothers and, through their stories, challenges negative representations and assumptions about who they are, what they do, how they live their lives and what their hopes are for the future.

The most striking features to emerge from the research are the strength of commitment grandmothers have to their families, the positive way grandmothership is reported and, how heavily involved grandmothers are in caring for wider kin. However, what is of concern is that grandmothers should not be seen as a free resource by the state to help keep afloat community-care policies and provide dedicated and cheap and childcare, or by their families to fill in the gaps in their busy life styles. The social and familial pressures to care for family members placed on this middle generation of women are enormous, and the injustice of this situation is exacerbated by the fact that the work they do goes unrecognised and, in many cases, financially unrewarded. As this is a situation that is likely to continue, it is vital that the experience and practice of grandmothers should be studied further. Their contribution to their families and to society, as my study has so clearly recognised, needs to be understood, acknowledged and placed in the public arena to be carefully considered when making and implementing social policy. As my findings have emphasised, the particularities and specificities of being a grandmother show a complex relation to both macro and micro factors of social life. As grandmothers, my participants are constantly adjusting to changing social and family needs and, in many cases, they are facilitators, making the juggling of the many complexities of living in

modern family life possible. If grandmothers withdrew the enormous amount of their unpaid work the costs to society and to their families, would be enormous and the cost would not only be financial. My thesis argues for a rejection of the myths surrounding grandmothers and a recognition of their contributions to society. Through the acknowledgment of the vital work that grandmothers perform, and by accepting that their lives are multi-faceted and fluid, the depressing, unconstructive representations and assumptions of grandmothers as 'past it', dependent, passive, a burden, a problem and disengaged from society, will be replaced by more empowering, positive images of older women.

## **Appendices**

Appendix A	The Questionnaire
Appendix B	Profile of the Twenty Grandmothers
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Age at which last child was born

Age at which first became a grandmother

Age at birth of last grandchild

Name of grandchild	Age	Sex	Maternal Paternal	Geographical Distance from Grandchild

State which grandchild/children you have most contact with

Pseudonym	Marital Status	Age	Age Became G/M	Nos Ch	Nos of G/C	Proximity to G/children
Angela	married	52	48	3	2	very close
Betty	widow	69	43	3	6	close
Connie	married	56	51	4	4(1+3 step)	one close three others abroad
Diane	married	56	44	2	4	not close
Doris	married - since widowed	63	45	3	8 (1 step)	1 resident grandson others close
Emma	married	42	40	2	2	close
Faith	married	53	50	2	2	one close one not close
Gayle	married	53	43	2	2	close
Gill	married	51	36	2	4	close
Helen	married	54	50	3	2	very close
Irene	married	53	47	2	2 (2 step)	close
Jane	separated	82	52	3	6 + 2 great g/c	two close four not close
Jess	widowed	76	58	2	2	not close
Kate	married	55	50	4	3	two close one not
Laura	married	60	50	2	4	not close
Lorna	married	47	44	3	1	1 resident granddaughter
Mary	married	61	47	2	3	close
Maureen	married	65	46	4	4 (1 step)	1 resident grandson one other close, two not close
Phyllis	married	58	44	2	5	resident grandson others close
Susan	married	65	58	3	4	close

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Husband's Occupation</b>	<b>Class</b>	<b>Health</b>
<b>Angela</b>	housewife	maintenance officer	working	good
<b>Betty</b>	retired teacher	computer analyst	middle	not good
<b>Connie</b>	p/t market researcher	retired business man	middle	good
<b>Diane</b>	p/t cashier retired clerical officer	forestry worker	middle	good
<b>Doris</b>	p/t housekeeper	retired engineer forces	lower middle	good
<b>Emma</b>	p/t teaching assistant	manual worker	working	good
<b>Faith</b>	shopkeeper	shopkeeper	middle	good
<b>Gayle</b>	housewife p/t seamstress	stores person	lower middle	good
<b>Gill</b>	director family business	director family business	middle	good
<b>Helen</b>	housewife p/t clerical worker	purchasing manager	middle	good
<b>Irene</b>	p/t doctors' receptionist	self-employed electrician	middle	good
<b>Jane</b>	housewife	retired business executive	middle	not good
<b>Jess</b>	retired nursing auxiliary	bus driver	working	not good
<b>Kate</b>	HE administrator	academic	middle	good
<b>Laura</b>	p/t secretary	retired professional	middle	good
<b>Lorna</b>	clerical officer	manager	middle	good
<b>Mary</b>	retired shop keeper	retired fisherman	lower middle	good
<b>Maureen</b>	retired secretary	retired self-employed building worker	middle	good
<b>Phyllis</b>	housewife	invalided building worker	working	good
<b>Susan</b>	p/t clerical worker	retired building worker	lower middle	good

## **Appendix C Biographical Details of the Twenty Grandmothers**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Biographical Details</b>
<b>Angela</b>	Angela was 52, married, had 3 children and 2 grandchildren and had fostered 36 children. She had adopted one child with learning difficulties. She had lived in her present home for 31 years in the same street as her father and in the next street to her daughter. She had been a housewife for most of her married life and described her family as 'central to her life'. Angela had a secondary school education leaving school at fifteen. Her husband worked as a maintenance officer and they described themselves as working class. She had recently been treated for cancer and was still recovering. She was very involved with her church, local swimming club and voluntary work.
<b>Betty</b>	Betty was 69, she was widowed, had 3 children and 8 grandchildren and 4 great grandchildren. She had lived in her present home for 6 years. Betty had lived abroad and travelled with her husband in the forces. Three of her grandchildren lived close as did 4 of her great grandchildren. Betty had a grammar school education going on to higher education. She had been a teacher for much of her married life. Her husband was a computer analyst and they described themselves as middle-class. Her interests were mainly been dancing and keeping fit. She suffered from two long-term chronic illnesses.
<b>Connie</b>	Connie was 56, married, had 4 step-children and 1 of own. She had 4 step grandchildren and 1 grandchild. She had lived in her present home for 32 years. Connie had lived locally all of her life but travelled extensively. Two of her step-grandchildren lived abroad. The estranged father of her own grandchild lived abroad. She went to grammar school and trained as a secretary working part-time for some of her married life. She now worked as a market researcher. Her husband was a retired businessman. They could be described as middle-class. Her health was very good. Her interests were her family and her work and 'anything crafty'.
<b>Diane</b>	Diane was 56, married, had 2 children and 4 grandchildren. She had lived in her present home for 4 years. Two of her grandchildren lived quite close and 2 some distance away. She went to grammar school leaving at 16. She had worked in clerical work, mostly part-time, since she married. Her husband was a forestry worker and they described themselves as middle-class. Her interests were gardening, her home and her family.
<b>Doris</b>	Doris was 63, married had 3 children and 8 grandchildren all of



whom lived close by. She had one resident grandson. She had lived in her present home for 15 years. She left school at 14 and worked 'in service' until her marriage and then as a full-time housewife. She now worked part-time as a housekeeper. Her husband was a retired engineer in the forces. She described herself as middle-class. Her health was good and her interests were dress-making, reading and craft work.

**Emma**

Emma was 42, had 1 surviving child and 1 grandchild. She had lived locally for all her life and in her present house for 17 years. She went to secondary school leaving at fifteen with no qualifications. She had been a housewife for many years but was now working as a teaching assistant in school. Her husband was a manual worker and they could be described as working class. Her interests were the church, her family and music.

**Faith**

Faith was 53, she had 2 children and 2 grandchildren. She had lived in her present home for the past 12 years. She had a secondary school education. She was a full-time housewife for many years and travelled with her husband in the forces until he retired. They now ran a retail shop together. They described themselves as middle-class. Her health was very good. Her interests were reading and sewing and the family.

**Gayle**

Gayle was 53, she had 2 children and 2 grandchildren. She had lived in her present house for 29 years. She left school at fifteen and was a full-time housewife for many years and was now a part-time seamstress. Her husband was a stores person. Her health had not been good recently mainly due to the stress of looking after her father and mother-in-law until their deaths and having her daughter and grandson living with her. Her interests were the church, Girl Guides and dress making.

**Gill**

Gill was 51, married and had 2 children and 4 grandchildren. All her grandchildren lived close by. She had lived in her present home for less than a year. She had a second home abroad. She left school at sixteen and began work as an accounts trainee. She married very young and was a full-time housewife and then a partner with her husband in their family business. She now worked part-time the business and could be described as middle-class. Her health was very good and her interests were travelling, shopping and motor racing.

**Helen**

Helen was 54, she had 3 children and 2 grandchildren. She had lived in her home for 28 years but lived part of the year in her second home abroad. Her daughter and grandchildren lived next door. She left school at sixteen and trained as an accounts clerk. She was a full time mother for many years

returning to her former career when the children were at secondary school. Her husband was a purchasing manager. Her health was very good. She had many interests and was very involved with the local community and loved travelling.

**Irene**

Irene was 53, married with 2 children and 2 grandchildren. Her grandchildren lived very close. She had lived in her present home for 13 years. She left school at 16 and worked in clerical positions leaving to become a full-time housewife when her children were born. She now worked part-time as a doctors' receptionist. Her husband was an electrician. She could be described as lower middle-class. Her health was very good and her interests were running a local swimming club, her family and travelling.

**Jane**

Jane was 82, separated, had 3 children, 6 grandchildren and 2 great grandchildren. One of her daughters lived abroad; two of her grandchildren lived close and the others lived away. She had lived in her present home for 40 years. She left school at fourteen and was 'in service' for many years and then in the forces during the war. She became a full-time housewife after she married. Her husband was a retired business executive. She could be described as middle-class. Her health was not good having two long-term chronic illnesses. Her main interests were the church and genealogy.

**Jess**

Jess was 76 and widowed. She had 2 children and 2 grandchildren. She had lived in her present house for over 30 years and did not live close to her children and grandchildren. She left school at 14 and started work on the trams. She later trained as an auxiliary nurse and carried on with this work until she retired. She had also been closely involved with Union work in the health service. Her husband was very often out of work. She described herself as working class. Her health was failing - she had chronic health problems. Her main interest was the church.

**Kate**

Kate was 55, married and had 4 children and 3 grandchildren. Two of her grandchildren lived nearby. She had lived in her present house for 2 years. She continued through higher education and managed to carry on her career while bringing up her children. Her husband was in higher education. She could be described as middle-class. Her health was good. Her main interests were reading, her family and her work.

**Laura**

Laura was 60, married, had 2 children and 4 grandchildren. All her grandchildren lived away with two living abroad. She had lived in her present home for 37 years. She went to a grammar school and then trained as a secretary. She was a full-time housewife until the children were at secondary school and

then she returned to part-time secretarial work. Her husband was a retired professional worker. She could be described as middle-class. Her health was good and her interests were many including belonging to operatic and choral societies.

**Lorna**

Lorna was 47, married with 3 children and 1 grandchild. Her grandchild lived with her. She had lived in her present home for 19 years. She left school at 16 and went to the local technical college. She was a full-time housewife while her children were young returning to part-time clerical work when they were older. Her husband was a manager. She could be described as middle-class. Her health was very good and her interests were her family, walking, caravanning and reading.

**Mary**

Mary was 61, married and had 2 children and 3 grandchildren all of whom lived close by. She had lived in her present house for 39 years. She left school at 15 and worked in her family's retail business. Her husband was a retired, self-employed fisherman. She could be described as lower middle class. Her health was good and her main interests were her family, helping with the local pre-school playgroup and anything to do with the local community and helping to preserve local history.

**Maureen**

Maureen was 65, married with 4 children and 4 grandchildren. Her eldest grandchild lived with her for many years one lived close by, and 2 lived away. She has lived in her home for 13 years. She left school at 15 and trained as a secretary. She was a full-time housewife for most of her married life doing some part-time work in later years. Her health was generally good. Her interests were her family, amateur dramatics.

**Phyllis**

Phyllis was 58, married with 2 children and 5 grandchildren one of whom lived with her. She has lived in her present home for 2 years. She left school at 15; she did shop work and had been a housewife since she married. Her husband was disabled but was a building worker before he became incapacitated. She could be described as working class. Her health was good and her main interests were the Church and her family.

**Susan**

Susan was 65, married had 3 children, 4 grandchildren. All of her grandchildren lived close by. She had lived in her home for 30 years. She left school at 14 and trained as an accounts clerk. She was a full-time housewife for many years returning to work in accounts when the children were old enough. Her husband was a retired building worker. Her health was good and her interests were her family, reading and craft work.

# Are You a Grandmother?

- Have you something to say about the experience of being a grandmother?
- Can you spare about 2 hours of your time to talk about what being a grandmother means to you?
- Would you be prepared to take part in a research project that aims to understand the grandmother grandchild relationship?
- **If you have answered yes to all of the above questions then please ring .....for further details or write to me at PO Box ....**

The research is being funded by the Economic Social Research Council and being carried out by myself a PhD Student (a grandmother myself) from the University of York

## Appendix E How the Respondents Were Contacted

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Strategy used</b>	<b>Where the interview took place</b>
<b>Angela</b>	Newspaper article	Respondent's home
<b>Betty</b>	Snowballing	Respondent's home
<b>Connie</b>	Newspaper article	Respondent's home
<b>Diane</b>	Doctor's Surgery	Respondent's home
<b>Emma</b>	Women's Centre	My office
<b>Faith</b>	Newspaper article	Respondent's home
<b>Gayle</b>	Newspaper article	Respondent's home
<b>Helen</b>	Doctor's. Surgery	Respondent's home
<b>Jess</b>	Women's Centre	Respondent's home
<b>Mary</b>	Snowballing	Respondent's home
<b>Phyllis</b>	Newspaper article	Respondent's home
<b>Irene</b>	Snowballing	Respondent's home
<b>Jane</b>	Church notice board	Respondent's home
<b>Kate</b>	College notice board	Respondent's office
<b>Lorna</b>	Snowballing	My home
<b>Maureen</b>	Doctor's. Surgery	Respondent's home
<b>Susan</b>	Snowballing - daughter known to me mother agreed to be interviewed	Respondent's home
<b>Laura</b>	Snowballing	Respondent's office
<b>Gill</b>	Snowballing - daughter known to me mother agreed to be interviewed	Respondent's home
<b>Doris</b>	Newspaper article	My home

## Appendix F Consent Form

### Consent Form

My name is Anne Fairbank. I am doing research on a project entitled '*Understanding the Grandmother/Grandchild Relationship*'.

The project is sponsored by the Economic Social Research Council and I am a PhD Student at The University of York.

My supervisor is:

Professor Stevi Jackson and can be contacted at:  
The Centre for Women's Studies,  
The University of York,  
Heslington,  
York, YO1 5DD.  
Tel 01904 433671.

Thank you for agreeing to take part in the project. Before we start I would like to emphasise that:

1. your participation is entirely voluntary
2. you are free to refuse to answer any question
3. you are free to withdraw at any time

The interview will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to members of the research team. Excerpts from the interview tapes may be part of the final research thesis, but under no circumstances will your name or any identifying characteristics be included in the thesis. Pseudonyms will be used and place names changed.

Please sign this form to show that you have read and understand the contents of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_ signed

\_\_\_\_\_ print name

Please send a report on the results of the project. YES NO (circle one)

Address for those requesting a research report

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix G General topics for research questions**

**Preliminary question asked in all cases:**

**How did you feel when you first learned that you were about to become a grandmother?**

Can you describe how you felt when your first grandchild was born?

How did you feel when subsequent grandchildren were born?

How closely were you involved at the birth/s?

Did you have any expectations about how it would be?

How often do you see your grandchild/children?

What factors affect how often you see your grandchild/children?

Ideally, would you like to see more or less of them?

What kinds of things do you do with your grandchildren?

**What kind of help either practically, financially or emotionally do you give to your grandchild/children? (asked in all cases)**

What kinds of things do your grandchildren do for you?

**What does being a grandmother mean to you? (asked in all cases)**

Can you describe how you feel about being a grandmother?

How do you think you might have felt if you had not become a grandmother?

Within the wider social context how do you feel that the role of a grandmother is regarded today?

Looking back, what kind of relationship did you have with your own grandmother if at all?

Do you feel that the role has changed at all and if so in what ways?

Do you feel that there are any sets of guidelines or rules to follow about being a grandmother?

**How does being a grandmother differ from being a mother? (asked in all cases)**

How is it decided what level of involvement you have with your grandchildren? Do you wait to be asked, offer help or just go ahead and make your own decisions?

If you could change the relationship in any way how would you like things to be different?

**How does being a grandmother fit with the rest of your life? (asked in all cases)**

Does it interfere or intrude on your personal time?

**What is the most important thing in your life? (asked in all cases)**

Have you had to make any sacrifices through being a grandmother?



## Appendix H Example of Transcription

- 1 Lorna Er, yes er, it was never er, the age, maybe age was never a  
2 problem. I was what, 50... which er yeh, I was young enough to  
3 enjoy it...it was good.^
- 4 *Int Can you describe to me how you felt when your grandchild was*  
5 *actually born?*
- 6 Lorna Completely overwhelmed. Emotion that I'd never anticipated.  
7 Er.... in some ways it was more overwhelming than the birth of my  
8 own children.
- 9 *Int Really, in what way?*
- 10 Lorna Because it was unexpected. ^
- 11 *Int Right.*
- 12 Lorna It was an unexpected emotion so it took me by surprise basically.
- 13 *Int When your first grandchild was born, and when other*  
14 *grandchildren were born, how were you involved and what did you*  
15 *actually do at the time?*
- 16 Lorna The first one, Kirsty, we were at home..... but I rang in the early  
17 hours of the morning and we were down and saw her that  
18 morning, so we saw her immediately. ^ But this mum was very  
19 possessive of her baby and she didn't want us at home when she  
20 came home, so we came home.> And we had problems because  
21 she was very possessive and we had difficulty seeing this one.>  
22 Er... (sighs) one of the problems, but it was overcome,..  
23 eventually.>
- 24 *Int So it resolved itself?*
- 25 Lorna It's resolved itself yeh. It was just that she was a first time mother  
26 and she felt she had to cope on her own and cope on her own  
27 meant that you stayed on your own and coped... Part of it was  
28 postnatal... the problem. It's totally resolved now.
- 29 *Int How did you feel – did you feel excluded?*
- 30 Lorna Yes. Er, she'd say things like... if we said 'oh we're going to pop  
31 down and see you' she'd say things like, 'well you only saw us  
32 three weeks ago, why do you want to come again?'. But I've  
33 talked to her since and have found out that it was because she  
34 wasn't coping and she was afraid to be found out not coping. So  
35 it all was resolved. But with the second one, she had her when  
36 she was in (S) in (A) which is the one where my husband went up  
37 to be with the other little girl while she went into hospital. He rang  
38 me in the early hours of the morning and I was on a train by 6.30.  
39 (both laugh) And I flew for the first time  
40 in my life on a small plane from (G) to....(A).

### CODES:

- 44 ^ Intonation rises:  
45 > Intonation falls:  
46 \_\_\_\_\_ Stressing a point:  
47 . . . . . Pause while thinking in seconds:  
48 (... ) Description of action or explanation of something not  
49 audible  
50

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