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Men's Experiences of Grandfatherhood: A Welcome Surprise

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Abstract

The present-day involvement of men in many facets of childrearing stands in contrast to previous eras when men accepted that the major task of fathering was to provide a secure income to support the family. This imperative often required long hours away from the family. However, when men whose contact with children has been limited due to work and cultural constraints retire, their newly acquired lifestyle may bring fresh opportunities for involvement with grandchildren. An important question therefore concerns the impact of caring for young children on men's perceptions of their role as grandfathers. This interview study explores the experiences of 19 Australian grandfathers. The analysis found themes that relate to relationships and change, as well as themes concerning core beliefs and existential questions. The findings demonstrate the potential for insight into family relationships and personal growth in older age when studying the topic of grandparenting and caring from the male perspective.

Keywords: Grandparents, grandfathers, relationships, generations, individual psychology

Over the last decade or so, grandparenting has been given increasing recognition both in the literature and in policy development with several commentators claiming that social and demographic changes have had a substantial impact on the experience of grandparenthood (Kemp, 2007; Ochiltrie, 2006; Szinovacz, 1998). Growing amounts of research show that grandparents are filling a gap in childcare, whether as part-time or full-time carers of their grandchildren (Higgins, 2007). In Australia, very few children under the age of five have no face-to-face contact with at least one grandparent; however the degree of grandparents' responsibility varies considerably according to family structure and expectations (Gray, Mission & Hayes, 2005).

When studying grandparent involvement in family life, researchers have been particularly interested in their roles and behaviours (Bengtson, 1985; Mitchell, 2008; Waldrop et al., 1999), their grandparenting style or involvement (Goodfellow, 2003; Hoff, 2007; Mueller, Wilhelm, & Elder, 2002; Neugarten & Weinstein, 1964; Nussbaum & Bettini, 1994), and their relationships with their grandchildren (Gray, 2005; Kennedy, 1992; Roberto & Stroes, 1992; Weston & Qu, 2009). However, for the most part, findings have focused on grandmothers. Researchers tend to use female-tilted measures that do not account for specific male involvement characteristics (Mann, 2007; Spitze & Ward, 1998), or grandmother and grandfather are blended into homogenous findings, with few gender specific implications (Harper, 2005). This tendency seems to mirror the trajectory of fatherhood research: fathers were relatively invisible in research until the 1980s.

Yet it is important to understand the contribution of grandfathering to family life as well as to their wellbeing. As an extension of the interest in men's changing role in families, systematic research into grandfathers may also reveal important and specific influences on intergenerational family relationships. Further, understanding men's grandfathering experiences has the potential to support theoretical advances in explaining psychosocial

aspects of older age, and highlight important aspects of human experience not yet considered as significant.

The extant research on grandfathers shows detail and variation, yet it is multidimensional and mixed (Stelle, Fruhauf, Orel & Landry-Meyer, 2010; Taubman-Ben-Ari, Findler & Shlomo, 2012). For some men, grandfathering is an unimportant role (Kivett, 1985); public function and task oriented roles are more characteristic of their activities (Bengtson, 1985; Hagestadt & Neugarten, 1985). Yet others consider grandfathering to be important (Mann & Leeson, 2010; Reitzes & Mutran, 2004; Wolcott, 1998). Some men involve themselves in 'fun-seeking' activities with their grandchildren (Neugarten & Weinstein, 1964), enjoy and benefit from their grandfathering (Crawford, 1981; Taubman-Ben-Ari et al., 2012), and build ties with their grandchildren across time and circumstance (Cunningham-Burley, 1984; Scraton & Holland, 2006). Some men experience a loosening of expectations (Mann & Leeson, 2010), become more person-oriented and affectionate (Peterson, 1999; Sorenson & Cooper, 2010), and are proactive concerning family relationships (Roberto, Allen, & Blieszner, 2001). Although the literature generally documents grandmothers as closer to grandchildren (Pollet, Nettle & Nelissen, 2007), grandfathers are often no less satisfied in their role (Condon, Corkindale, Luszcz, & Gamble, 2013; Peterson, 1999; Reitzes & Mutran, 2004; Thiele & Whelan, 2006).

Two important factors appear to influence this varied expression of grandfatherhood. One is the raft of social influences that have shaped successive generations of attitudes towards men in family and work life. Being the breadwinner and providing for family life was conventional for men in the last 3 decades of the 20th century. Such patterns are not easily broken as people change generational commitments, due in part to a lack of role models (Daly, 1993; Furstenberg & Weiss, 2000), and many men continue to acknowledge

women as central to relationships (Mann & Leeson, 2010; see also Goodsell, Bates & Behnke, 2011).

Nevertheless, in the wake of the involved fatherhood movement, men are crafting new roles and patterns of behaviour for themselves, based on their own motives and desires for caring (StGeorge & Fletcher, 2011). Likewise, while the literature comprehensively documents men's emotional inexpression (e.g., Fischer & Good, 1997; Lorber & Garcia, 2010; Wong & Rochlen, 2005), there is now a more nuanced understanding of men's emotional capacities and expression (Lively, 2008; Wood & Eagly, 2012), especially within families (Roger, Rinaldi & Howe, 2012). In addition, contemporary flexibility around masculine characteristics and roles can allow men to expand their perspectives, facilitating a certain 'fluidity' of identity (Doucet, 2004; Sorensen & Cooper, 2010).

A second explanation for the variation in expression of grandfathering concerns lifecourse development. Life events affect both the priorities people make and the roles they adopt. Retirement for example, has a significant effect on time availability and financial commitments, as well as wellbeing and relationships (Gunnarson, 2009; Kim & Moen, 2002). At this time of life, many men and women choose to invest in personal and social development (Onyx & Baker, 2006; Pepin & Deutscher, 2011). And despite grandparenting being a countertransition (the role is bestowed without grandparents' choice), many people choose to build upon this circumstance. The men in Condon et al.'s (2013) study for example, wanted *more* contact with their grandchildren.

Here, theories of human development offer an explanation for grandfathers' motivations for their involvement in children's lives. In Erikson's psychosocial theory of development (Erikson, 1997), one stage central to adult life is the generativity versus stagnation (7th) phase, where adults are challenged to balance "creativity, productivity, and procreation over stagnation and self-absorption" (Snarey, in Dollahite & Hawkins, 1998, p. 110). This most

often involves creating family. McAdams, Hart, and Maruna (1998) further suggest that this generative work is important throughout the lifecourse. In this perspective, generativity is an adaptive process of providing for future generations (McAdams et al.). Erikson's 8th stage marks a shift from generativity, to reflecting on and assessing the life lived. This may involve acceptance, disappointment or despondence. Here McAdams et al. (1998) suggest that adults' reflections still contain substantial components of generative commitment and action that are enacted through connecting with others.

This concept of generativity has been particularly useful in fatherhood research. Hawkins and colleagues developed a conceptual 'ethic of generative fathering' based on Erikson's theory and Snarey's empirical work on fathers (Hawkins, Dollahite & Lamb, 1998). This generative ethic foregrounds fathers' willingness and ability to meet children's needs. Bates (2009) adapted this framework to grandfathers, proposing seven 'work ethics' as generative motivators for men's interactions with children in their extended families, including obligations such as stewardship, spiritual, and mentoring work.

Motivators for relationships in later life can be also explained by Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST, Carstensen, 2006). This theory suggests that relationships and activities that hold emotional meaning and optimise psychological wellbeing become increasingly important as people age. Motivated by appreciation of a time-limited future, people attach less value to breadth and frequency of social interaction, and more value to "affectively rich interaction" (Carstensen, 1995, p. 154). Both SST and Erikson's stages suggest that for grandfathers, family connections will become increasingly salient goals and that the meaning of these relationships will be packed with concern, commitment and action. Grandfathering thus may occur as a significant life event that occurs not only in the contemporary climate of involved fatherhood and changing conceptions of masculinity, but also in the context of personal development.

Given the sporadic evidence of similarities between grandmothers and grandfathers identified above and the charge that grandfather contribution is underestimated (Arthur, Snape & Dench, 2003; Harper, 2005) and under-researched (Mann, 2007; Stelle et al., 2011), a study of grandfather experiences has the potential to reveal undercurrents of family life that contribute to family and personal growth. Furthermore, the grandfather literature is predominantly American and British, and researchers suggest that Australian grandparents have different experiences than American or UK grandparents (Condon et al., 2013; Sims & Rofail, 2013). Therefore, a perspective on the phenomenon of grandfatherhood may complement previous Australian research on time with grandchildren (Weston & Qu, 2009) or grandfather satisfaction (Peterson, 1999).

To understand this phenomenon therefore, this study explores the meaning of grandfatherhood from an individual psychological perspective. The study focuses on the idiographic – how the men experience relationships with their grandchildren, and what this experience means for their view of themselves and their world. Drawing on qualitative data and using an interpretative approach, it explores the men's relationships with their grandchildren and their individual perceptions of the meaning of grandfathering. It further examines the implications by considering the relationship of these experiences to personal development.

Method

Procedure

Following institutional ethics approval, men were recruited from a regional area in Australia through posters placed in public venues and word of mouth. Men were invited to participate if they were the biological grandfather of at least one grandchild under 12 years, and for whom they had regular care and responsibility at least fortnightly, although not as fulltime carers of their grandchildren.

The majority of the men were maternal biological grandfathers in their sixties. Most were retired, while five still worked in some capacity. Most felt they were reasonably comfortable financially and in good health. All men were Caucasian (none declared Aboriginality). Religion was not requested, however, the majority of Australians are Christian (ABS, 2011), with a further 22% self-declared as 'no-religion.' (See the case summary in Table 1).

Insert Table 1 here

Data collection

Face-to-face interviews with the men took place in the men's homes. The semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix) included questions about men's current experiences with their grandchildren (focusing on one grandchild under 12 years), and comparisons with their previous experiences of fathering. Final questions encouraged the men to reflect more broadly on grandfathering: whether their expectations had been met and what they had 'learned' from being a grandfather. The 19 interviews were collected by the first author and a male research assistant (5 interviews). In contrast to other researchers (e.g., Cunningham-Burley, 1984), we had no difficulty in conversing with the men (see also Boden, 2008). The interviews varied in length from 20 to 75 minutes, with the transcript word count averaging 4333, ranging from 2330 to 8179 words, with no systematic differences between the male and female interviewers concerning interview length. All men discussed their experiences willingly, and many gave prolific descriptions of their activities and attitudes; however, the inevitable variation in people's ability to reflect upon and make explicit their subjectivity required an interpretive methodological approach that would facilitate a rich description of the men's involvement and understanding of grandfathering.

Approach

In order to understand the meaning that men make of their experience of grandfatherhood, we followed the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2008). This approach has two main aims: the first is to try to understand the participant's experience of the particular phenomenon, what it is like to be a grandfather. This aim leads the researcher to study the particular details of the individual's experience, leading not to a first person account of grandfathering, but a third-person, psychologically informed description (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). The description is not a verbatim record of the individual's thoughts, but a descriptive account developed by the researcher who then creates themes that relate to thoughts, feelings, expectations and so on. The second aim of the approach is to develop an interpretative analysis of this initial thematic account, by positioning it in relation to a broader psychological and social context, for example, its relationship with psychological theories, or to the contexts and structures of family life.

Analysis

Strategies used to develop this interpretative phenomenological account included designing an interview protocol to encourage reflection on subjective experiences, focusing particularly on activities and mental/emotional responses to those activities (Shinebourne, 2011). In analysis, the text is read and annotated, the researcher searching for those things that 'mattered' to the participants, their thoughts, relationships, values, principles for example. We also studied participant reflection and rumination in order to enrich the description with psychological processes. The next analytical steps involved transforming the notes into themes that attempted to capture the essential quality or psychological essence of the text. These stages thus were more abstract while still grounded in the participants' experiences. In this study, hierarchical themes were developed for each case (cumulative coding) , and when all transcripts were analysed, patterns across cases (integrative coding) were identified by comparing themes for similarity or divergence, seeking at the same time higher-order

master themes as well as identifying non-shared themes. This process keeps the researcher committed to the idiographic as well as bringing to light the abstract, higher-order constructs shared between participants.

Enhancing rigour of the study

Hermeneutic interpretivist methods are concerned with the construction of meaning by researcher and participants, and to this end, constraints, as 'expressions of rigour' (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006), are exercised to protect the analysis and interpretation from subjectivism. Discourse between authors throughout the project focused on *attunement* to the data in the early analyses, by questioning the fit between coding categories and participants' accounts (through comparing readings of the transcripts with emergent nodes for each case). Discussion of the superordinate and master themes focused on *concreteness*, where the authors considered the correspondence of the themes to the practicalities of everyday life, for example, the obligation and powerful family patterns themes. Review of the final interpretive structure also included joint consideration of *resonance*, that is, the experiential effect of the interpretation on the authors.

We also undertook steps to demonstrate consistency in coding for the final thematic structure through negotiated agreement (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman & Pedersen, 2013). Both authors read and annotated the interviews and through discussion developed the themes in the cumulative coding stage. Once the final themes were developed in the integrative coding stage (by the first author¹), agreement between coders on coding structure was assessed on 4 (20%) randomly selected interviews. We used Kurasaki's (2000) method of coding comparison, where coding matched if both coders coded the text at the code, within a range of five lines. Using proportion agreement (calculated by dividing the number of coding agreements by the number of agreements and disagreements combined), we achieved a first

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¹ The first author is the primary 'knowledgeable coder' (Campbell et al., 2013) in this study. This is based on her experience in qualitative methods and immersion in the grandfather literature.

set of reliabilities of Connection (.70), Dedication (.46), Joy (.62), Learning (.64), and Shift (.76), (ratings were averaged across the 4 transcripts). After discussion on code definitions and conceptual boundaries of the themes, a final reliability averaged across the 5 themes was .96. This agreement is relatively high. This may be attributed to the level of discussion and negotiation in the early stages, as well as to the broadness of the themes at the point of calculation. Although coding and interpretive decisions were jointly considered through team discussion, the validity of the study is not claimed as final; other cogent and persuasive interpretations are possible from researchers with different horizons.

Evidence for the themes is provided through interview quotes or in-vivo comments (indicated in double quotation marks). All quotations use pseudonyms.

Findings

The men who took part in this study were on the whole unused to discussing their experiences as grandfathers, doubting their capacity to offer or “tell you” any useful information. As a lifecourse “countertransition”, a role change produced by the role changes of others (Quadagno, 2014), and thus to an extent unplanned, they appeared to have few expectations of the personal and social consequences of grandfatherhood. Yet, as the findings show, all appeared to make deliberate, thoughtful choices concerning their activities and attitudes about grandfathering. In this study, two core themes capture both the experiences of grandfathering, and the meaning of these experiences to grandfathers as well as to the broader picture of personal development. The first core theme, *Glad dedication*, consists of three subthemes. Grandfathers’ central activity was *Connection* with their grandchildren. This child-focused connection was underpinned by a passionate *Dedication* to the family unit that delivered a sense of *Joy* they had never before experienced. The second core theme, *More than generational change*, concerns the men’s opportunities to reconsider the importance of family, of emotions and relationships, demonstrating a *Shift in perspective*. For the majority

of men, the shift as a catalyst reinforced their dedication to family; for a few of these men, the unexpected connection led to a more explicit questioning of their core beliefs. The subtheme *Personal Concerns* captures the difficulties the men encountered as grandparents. (See Table 2 for thematic structure).

Insert table 2 about here

Glad dedication

Connection. Grandfathers were centrally occupied with their connection to their grandchildren. They sought to build this connection through activity that was child-centred and harmonious. For some, this interaction was purposefully opening children to the world, showing and teaching them “good things” and new ideas; for others, a gentle hold of discipline and responsibility through talking and play was most important. Other men, enjoying the relinquishment of responsibility to the child’s parents, adored spoiling the grandchildren, engaging them in the delight of shared transgressions: rough and tumble play, teasing, “letting them be”: “Being a Pop, I think my role is to spoil them something wicked, to be different to their dads and hope they love me for it” (Ernest).

Grandfathers insisted on the importance of “being there”, giving grandchildren time and undivided attention, listening and affirming the importance of the child inside the family. Even though some of the men’s extended families were large, there was a strong sense of commitment to sharing love equally across the grandchildren, not singling any out as favourites, for “everyone’s the same”. The men also discussed the importance of providing an emotionally safe environment for the children. They described the importance of earning the trust of the child through involvement and consistency, aware that the relationship could not be taken for granted.

I wouldn't want to be a distant figure in her life. It will only do that, if you give yourself to it. If you are there when they get home from school or if you are there to do a puzzle with her, you have to give them time. It's not by default, I am fully aware of that. (Bob)

As Bob's words illustrate, men's concerns were not for baby sitting and caretaking; they deliberately extended themselves towards the children through a range of child-focused positive activities and emotions.

Family of origin patterns also influenced men's intentions for connecting with grandchildren; some recalled strong grandmothers and "hands on" grandfathers bringing them into the family circle.

I think that I have to say that I tried to model my relationship with my grandkids on the relationship I had with my grandfathers...So that was pretty important to me to make sure I had good relationship with my grandkids. (Harry)

The urge to be closely connected with grandchildren could also be motivated by a need to change family patterns, to give to children what the men themselves had not experienced from grandfather or father. As David described his experiences: "I wouldn't want to be a grandfather like my grandfather; I wouldn't like to be a grandfather like my father, so...I didn't want to do those things so I had to do the opposite." Instead, they offered their grandchildren unconditional support and deep involvement, "I've pushed a pram for every one of them: every one I've been involved with, every one" (Lance).

Tight boundaries. Nevertheless, this unconditional love still had its boundaries – grandfathers were particularly observant of their responsibilities of care and discipline in light of their position as "back up" to the parents:

You tend to be in the background. If they ask you something, you help them with, but you don't come out and tell them something that they should be doing as a father should. You tend to be sort of in the background but always ready there with anything you can

help them with, you know? Advice, work, whatever, but that's what it tends to be, as a grandfather. You're more in the background. (Sam)

Sam here articulates an experience common to many grandfathers; as is also discussed in the literature (e.g., Sorensen & Cooper, 2010; Tan, Buchanan, Flouri, Attar-Schwartz & Griggs, 2010); these grandfathers were sensitive to their own adult children's responsibility and decision-making on matters of values and discipline. Grandfathers took a cautious care approach that stepped back from hard and fast rules for the grandchildren:

Because there's things that you can't do because you're not the parent: you stay out of it, see? What I'd probably do with my own children you can't do with them, and you just try and keep it balanced. (Lance)

Lance's comment illustrates the acknowledged distinction between parents' task of raising children, which entails teaching, discipline and 24-hour responsibility, and grandparents' opportunity for loving and caring, yet still being able to "give them back." Giving back the child at the end of the day absolved the men of ultimate responsibility and freed up their ability to care without the onus of raising the child to adulthood.

Dedication to family. Underpinning the importance of the child were grandfathers' beliefs in the importance of, and emotional commitment to, the family. Family was considered a lifelong involvement, a continuum, where, with good relationships, members could watch each other grow, "watching history unfold". Family was a close-knit hub that members wanted to keep strong, where the younger generation was "part of the plans". Men were committed to "helping out" their own adult children, making themselves "always available" and fitting in. Some considered this support as their core purpose, others a moral obligation to the grandchildren, perhaps having perceived some vulnerability in the child's immediate family:

Because when they [the grandchildren] come here, they come into the exact opposite.

Ours is a very ordered, predictable environment here. They know they can come in the door and it'll always be exactly the same. They can do exactly the same things every day...So my obligation then is to provide them with something that's constant, predictable, no surprises, no shocks, and so on. They get enough of those at home (Rick).

As Rick's comment illustrates, the paradox of caring is its personal cost: for some, dedication was tinged with sadness caused by family breakdown, dysfunction or illness. Yet the drive to link lives, to enhance family solidarity, or to strengthen family patterns, along with the men's emotional and ethical determination, demonstrates that this commitment was not only intentional and purposeful but also an active interpersonal engagement.

A lot of people all of the time always say that I'm mad, I'm silly for doing what I do for the kids. And I say, "I'm not silly." It's them that's silly. They like to go away [on vacation], they've got their own life to lead they reckon; they go away. *I go with the kids*, see? (Lance)

Joy. While the previous theme of family dedication arose through a conjunction of beliefs and values about family bonds, intentions to support, and actions that involved children in their lives, this third theme is a representation of the emotional response associated with warm connections to grandchildren. Expressed in different ways, the men reflected on the joy of being loved, of being acknowledged as central to the child's life, and of feeling love: "I'm really acutely aware of the joy that that child brings" (Bob), it "brings an unconscious joy" (Alex). For some there was a sense of "soaking up" the child's trust and love; for others, it was pleasure in simply being together in a timeless way. It appeared that the men were highly sensitive to the moment by moment interaction and enjoyed the simple process of relationship.

And so I say to her, "Oh I like purple too". And she says, "You like purple too because you love me don't you?" And you know, that's it. And so quite often I'll say something and she'll say, "That's because you love me" ...And she sort of comes out and says, "You do that because you love me don't you?" ...And it makes me feel very, very happy (Ernest).

As the above extract shows, Ernest is elated by the simple reciprocity of the relationship. He is being loved for who he is, and what he does for the child, a love based on the quality or tenor of the relationship. Joy in relationship was sparked also by the types of interactions discussed earlier – the teasing, the looser hold on discipline. "But you're still not the first line of discipline and you love the fact that they can turn you around their little finger and get you to do anything they like" (Sam). Relaxing the discipline of home rules and duties delighted both receiver and giver. As also demonstrated in Ernest's comments above, some men were able to articulate both the joy and its effect on their own sense of self:

I think the joy of seeing, in my case my blood grandchildren from when they were really, really born, and they were like little prunes, I was quite taken with that. Yes, it does have an effect on you: I find it hard to explain because it's an internal thing (Alex).

It makes you feel a bit more complete, I've said once or twice, if I died tomorrow it wouldn't worry me because you know... you've done everything you could do, well not everything you could do, but you die contented; not that I want to! (Curt)

Curt's comments point inwards to the fulfilment of his own life purpose and goals; a notion similar to the Greek concept of *eudaimonia*. Here Curt is discussing his own feelings about the meaning of his life rather than his happiness at having experienced or obtained something. Comments from numerous men revealed these positive interpretations of existence, "It's just a state of being"; some reflecting a concept of self, "I'm a good Pop"; others reflecting the life itself, "a charmed life", "a wonderful life", "in fact, I don't know

what I'd do without them" (Lance). Being a "good Pop" for David for example, entailed choosing to connect, being responsible, understanding children and learning to accept them. At the same time, he happily revealed that the grandchildren "always want to come here" and fight over one-on-one time with Pop. This relationship with his grandchildren, invested with intention and understanding, had reciprocal benefits in terms of satisfaction or happiness, these emotions in turn imbuing his life with meaning and purpose.

More than generational change

Generative contexts: then and now. While the men's stories were contextualized in stories of 'then and now', the men's age appeared to have no clear relationship with the data's thematic structure. For example, both the youngest and the oldest men expressed similar views on social change. More potent were the social norms of fathering and worklife. Employment had dominated family life; for many this meant long work-shifts and a stressful life. At the same time, attitudes to child-rearing meant that for the most part, men had left this to their wives, a well-recognized social pattern (Bryant & Zick, 1996). Yet, the passage of time and social change were forces that both troubled and stimulated grandfathers' generative activities.

On the one hand, some social changes were unsettling. The men pointed to a range of vicissitudes: dwindling respect for elders, escalating social malaise, lax 'modern' parenting leading to reckless children, and limited environments for carefree active play. Clearly for some men, this was a clash of worlds: "It's just a changed world and I think you've just got to go along with it and it mightn't always suit you" (David).

On the other hand, some differences were positive. Most had more time and money given their changed work schedules. They also appreciated the emotional candor of the new era: they found that children easily gave and expected affection and that acknowledgement of children's needs and individuality generally had increased. They also welcomed changes in

attitudes to grandparents: recollections of their own 'frosty' and distant grandfathers contrasted with their personal experiences of being loved, valued and acknowledged.

A shift in perspective. Being a grandfather enabled the men to gain a new perspective on their fathering, and for some, an awareness of their inner self. The men all agreed that being a grandfather was certainly not what they had expected if they had expected anything at all. Most of them had "never thought about it." However, the turn of the emotional wheel was in several ways startling. The surprise element was the depth of feeling associated with grandchildren. The strength and impact of the relationship engendered the realization, over time or suddenly, of the primacy of connection, "Life's short, and people are important." For some, and at its deepest, this explicit surprise generated reflections on the wonder of life:

Like when R was born, I was sort of beside myself, this is just wonderful...And it was quite amazing. That was a major shock...Because it was our first grandchild, we were just beside ourselves; we thought it was wonderful (Ernest).

It's significant and it has surprised me it's impacted on this house, because prior to having a grandchild, well that's something that's just going to happen and I felt almost more emotionally attached to her from the moment she was born, than any of my children (Bob).

There was also the sense that the grandchildren were catalysts for breaking out of restrictive norms and for understanding the human condition:

I was brought up in the years, like a lot of older men, where you didn't show affection, you didn't show hurt, you didn't show pain, you didn't show anything: you were the stalwart of the family and such. And I think the grandchildren seem to undermine all that and bring you down to your knees, and then realize that you're just a human person after all, and you're no different to the next bloke, and all the things you were shown were necessarily that time in my...upbringing, was wrong. (Alex)

In his comments, Alex draws attention to the universality of connection and compassion, pointing at the same time to the effects of male socialization on his emotional expression. His shift occurs through this realization.

Less explicit discussions about *learning* also pointed to shifting standpoints. Some indicated new dispositions of humility, tolerance, or patience, adapting their usual styles of interaction to the needs of their new and highly-valued grandchildren. In the excerpt below, Nathan discusses a number of these learning points.

Be prepared to listen, listen is very important. You might want to be interrupting and telling them but, give them the opportunity to talk, to complain, to whatever... I'm probably very much the type of person that wants to resolve problems, and once I've resolved it I'm quite happy to help you. So I'm ready with answers for all sorts of problems, and whether they're appropriate or not is probably beside the point...[So now], to sort of hold back and say, "Come on, let other people have a go"....And realize also that our way's not the only way.

In his description of this adaptation, he reveals traits that had perhaps been useful to him in other circumstances. But his experience over the relatively short lifetime of his grandchildren has motivated a more receptive approach, an approach not adopted when fathering his own children. More implicit still, others realized their life was changing because of their close connections with their grandchildren: "That's not to say that I didn't enjoy life before that because I did, but it gave me different things to laugh at, you know, and different things to learn, different experiences" (Greg). Vince's "second bite of the cherry" as a grandfather gave him an opportunity to gain what might have been lost:

So if you were a new father now it would be good, much better really, to be able to spend more time with your kids than I possibly did 30 years ago. That's probably the difference. Now, that I'm retired and being able to spend time with the grandkids

sometimes makes me think I wish I'd have been able to do this 30 or 40 years ago.

(Vince)

Changing perspectives on life were also evidenced through generative thoughts such as “the new spring” of life, “watching history unfold,” and discussion of the evolution of relationships within the family.

Thus, the experience of change was variable. For a few, there was no difference between grandfathering and fathering: they acted in similar ways, and there was no significant change in their outlook. For a few, the shift came as a sudden unexpected emotional call that triggered reflections on the meaning of life, while for others, there was a more gradual realization of reciprocated trust and connection. Either way, the realization of the connection offered a life purpose, prompting most to re-order priorities and find new strategies for interpersonal engagement.

Personal concerns. Although there was variation in the men's personal circumstances, as shown in Table 1, there were few ramifications overtly discussed. Sam (the least well) and Karl (fulltime worker) both expressed how their circumstances enhanced their relationship with their grandchildren: Sam learned through his “one big health issue...to be more tolerant”, to be more relaxed with his grandchildren. As a result, he was pleased to say that “kids radiated to me”, much to others' surprise. Karl found that his grandchildren adapted to his disposition once he learned to be “honest with them” about his tiredness or irritability. There were rare expressions of the inevitability of death: Rick did suggest that he might “pop off” any time and, like Jack, worried about leaving the grandchildren “in the lurch”. And for two families, there was concern for the children's welfare in the environment they were returning to; here there was an underlying expression of emotional pain associated with a degree of helplessness, “sometimes it's just hard, you have to switch off and walk away” (Perez). This response is intricately tied to the men's position as not ultimately responsible

for the children's wellbeing, taking a cautious care approach, knowing that they had to "give them back".

Discussion

The aim of this study was to analyze the phenomenon of grandfathering, focusing on a small sample of men's activities, thoughts, and reflections as grandfathers, in order to build an interpretive account that linked individual and collective experiences to higher-order concepts. In so doing, we found themes that related to relationships and personal fulfilment, as well as themes that related to existential concerns.

The most significant shared feature of grandfathers' relationship to their grandchildren was their 'glad dedication'. The intention of simply "being there", along with their cautious care approach, echoes Sorensen and Cooper's (2010) findings. The fine details in this study show that grandfathers' highly child-focused activities were not simply baby-sitting or child care, but emergent, reciprocated relationships. Most men were immersed in the joy of being loved and being free to love the children outside prior parameters of parenting discipline and duties. Freedom from the responsibility of bringing up the child allowed the men to focus purely on the moment-by-moment relational interaction, rather than the discipline inherent in parenting. Their play encompassed a 'here-and-now' quality, a concept familiar to play therapists (Behr, 2003). This simple intimacy may benefit grandchildren, giving them multiple opportunities for secure relationships, where the attachment is not paired with discipline (see Schaffer and Emerson (1994) for a discussion).

Embedded in the overarching theme of 'glad dedication' were strong traces of a *generative fathering ethic*. Dollahite and Hawkins (1998) use this concept to provide a coherent explanation for men's involvement in their children's lives. In this framework, children's fundamental and universal needs trigger men's responsibilities and desires to respond. While mooted as a fathering ethic, the authors note that such triggers are lifespan concerns that call

for responses from men across their lifecycle or generational position (see also Ehlman & Ligon, 2012 and McAdams et al., 1998). The men in this study were certainly demonstrating this response across generations, towards both their adult children and their grandchildren. The men were free to develop strong relationships with their children's children, and in discussing this particular set of family members, there was no hint of the gatekeeping that problematizes other families' intergenerational relationships (e.g., Sims & Rofail, 2013).

Nevertheless, there were negative associations with the role. As raised in the Personal Concerns section, some issues impacted on the extent of men's involvement and their attitudes. Availability to the grandchild, either through health or time was one issue; this seemed to be negotiated fairly simply through agreement and compromise. More problematic for a couple of men was recognising the dysfunction in their grandchild's family, yet being relatively powerless to change the child's life course. The demarcation of responsibility was clear and their anguish was not unlike the feelings expressed by grandfathers becoming fulltime carers in Bullock's (2005) study. For other men, this (lack of ultimate) responsibility was less problematic, as there was jocular relief about 'handing them back' at the same time as being cautious about the extent of their discipline and rule-making. This cautious care approach, where grandparents want to help but are wary of interfering has been well- documented: Mason, May and Clarke (2007) highlight the quandary it presents, Thomas (1990) calls it a 'double-bind'.

For some men, the results of this relational work prompted an unexpected expansion of their emotional framework. Although explicitly expressing dedication and commitment, the depth of feeling and the reciprocity in the relationship with the grandchildren were both unforeseen and delightful. However, when this connection transcended traditional expectations, as also experienced by men in Roberto et al.'s (2001) study, the feelings were catalysts for rethinking lives and priorities. Rather than an identity transformation, the

difference appeared to be a widening of what they counted as existing, a widening of their understanding of life purpose and meaning. This is considered to be *ontological change*.

Ontological change occurs when people experience things that force them to see themselves differently, to change their core beliefs about themselves or the world (Raskin, 2011).

Grandfathers variously accomplished this through their own reflexivity and prior reflections on life, or through the provocation of the interview. For most, their experiences contradicted their previous and implicit assumptions, bringing about self-conscious reflection and changes in self-understandings (see also McGowan & Blakenship, 1994). Thus, where the shift in perspective occurred, it was seemingly triggered by bonds formed between family generations.

The findings of this study show that the junction of gender with generation is an instructive site for understanding men and families. Grandfathering strengthened the psychological wellbeing of the men, being an opportunity for many of eudaimonic self-realisation: making sense of the past, understanding their purposes for living, and expressing this in their own unique way. The preponderance of emotional themes, the privileging of emotional relationships, and even men's willingness to talk about this can perhaps be explained by SST (Carstensen, 2006). Aware of their place in time, the men chose to privilege emotional contact. The desire to live in the moment may be linked, albeit tacitly in this study, to the sense of a finite future.

Yet the themes of the study hint at a more complex development. They reflect the desire for generativity and care at the same time as showing the men's capacity to reflect and philosophise about life in order to make the most of their present moment. In terms of human development, this capacity closely represents *gerotranscendence* (Tornstam, 1989). While Erikson's theory describes people's acceptance of the life lived, gerotranscendence suggests that as people mature, they are more likely to redefine their reality. In this view, people's

perspective on time motivates them to reconsider attachments to family, seeing themselves as part of a generational stream rather than an individual link. Gerotranscendence also suggests a movement towards self-understanding, and an open mind toward personal and social relationships (Tornstam, 2005).

There are limitations to the study, the most apparent being the small purposive sample, resulting in a collection of men who valued family connections, and who were ready to reflect on fathering and discuss their interactions with grandchildren. Like Thomas (1990), we asked the men to reflect on a particular child in order to stimulate reflection on recent interactions and encourage concrete descriptions. This may have inadvertently prompted the men to discuss the child with whom they had the closest relationship, thus positively skewing their responses and or increasing their willingness to talk.

There is also discussion of the effect of gender and age differences on interviews (Arendell, 1997; Sallee & Harris, 2011), although there are no clear conclusions about those effects (Davis et al., 2010). In our study, 14 interviews were collected by a female researcher, and both data collectors were approximately the same age as the younger participants, and 20-30 years younger than the oldest. There was no apparent effect on the loquacity of the participants by gender (see Table 1). Possibly more important than age and gender is the effect of the researcher's interviewing skills (such as non-directive questioning, non-intrusive probing, and listening skills) on the quality of the data. Such effects were reduced by designing well-written interview questions, using the scripted interview protocol for each participant, and the supervision and debriefing of assistant researchers.

Another limitation may be that most of the men were maternal biological grandfathers, a linkage that has some evidence for closer involvement with grandchildren (Barnett et al., 2010; Chan & Elder, 2000). Nevertheless, four participants (21%) were the paternal or step-grandfather of the grandchild discussed in the interview; their participation in the study

would indicate a close connection to their grandchildren, and no unique themes emerged from that group of men, nor were there patterns of representation in existing themes. Discussion from both groups provided rich data for deeply exploring just one of many dimensions of grandfatherhood. Other aspects will be fruitful for future research: new questions could focus for example on linking specific fathering dispositions with grandfathering interactions, or the nature and quality of grandfathers' playfulness with their grandchildren.

Finally, there can be no guarantees that similar themes of dedication or shift would not be generated among grandmothers. However, the 'shift' theme arises from the rupture of men's norms of family interaction, where women are most often family caregivers and emotional supporters, and closer to grandchildren generally (Barnett, 2010; Eisenberg, 1988; Kivett, 1985; Knudsen, 2012), and men are less so. Therefore, experiencing and expressing this level of change would be a point of difference between men and women.

The implications for understanding grandfathers are two pronged. On one side there is the building evidence that grandparents are an important part of family life and as such, men should not underestimate their contribution to individual and family wellbeing. As a snapshot of Australian family life, this research shows men as willing supporters of children's development. This role gives more substance to alternatives to Australian male identity, which is traditionally "masculine, anti-domestic, muscular" (Crotty, 1999, p. ii). The 'Aussie battler' – working-class, hardworking, breadwinner not caregiver – is one example of this masculinity. But there is receptivity to new constructions of Australian fatherhood. Young men in Thompson, Lee and Adams (2013) for example, are keen to be involved with their children. Nevertheless, underlying their desire were lingering assumptions of gendered family roles in the context of assuring financial security. Perhaps when the economic pressure is relieved, as it was for the men in our study, men are cognitively and affectively freer to attend to relational matters. Slowly, the normative impression that female family

members are the most important to caring is being challenged by research that demonstrates the extent and depth of males' emotional bonds to family. Although the individuals themselves are challenging these norms, it takes the accumulation of research findings to demonstrate the movement within societies.

Associated with this is the implication for family services. Given the acknowledged need of grandparents for child care, and the burden this may add to older carers, family services will need to be prepared to include the older generation in their case work or counseling services. Strom and Strom (1997, 2013) suggest that education for grandparents is essential in order to support extended family wellness. They suggest that grandparents' contribution to family and community life should be more of an expectation and less an exception. Yet including men in these services is still problematic. The stimulus for father-inclusive practice in human services was the invisibility of fathers despite their obvious contribution to family formation. Likewise, some services will need to construct their processes differently in order to engage grandfathers in family care. Readily acknowledging the emotional work that men can contribute to the entire family system will help practitioners generate strategies for more holistic family connectedness.

In addition, this research reveals at least one avenue for potentiating older men's personal development. Using a strengths approach (Bernard, 2006), practitioners concerned for older men's mental health can be attuned to men's potential to benefit from involvement with grandchildren, and use this as a therapeutic route (Thomas, 1990).

Conclusion

Connection and close relationships were a marked change to the men's previous perspectives and philosophies of family life. There was less a sense of settlement and retreat in taking on the known, familiar, role of grandfather; and more discussion of discovery: the men pointed to unforeseen, unfamiliar experiences that contributed significantly to their sense of

wellbeing and family cohesion. Paradoxically, the relative invisibility of grandfathers and lack of scrutiny of men's attachment-like relationships has thrown details of family connections and the progress of maturity into sharp relief.

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Table 1: Case summary of participants

<i>Person</i>	<i>Age^a</i>	<i>Work Type^a</i>	<i>Financial Comfort^b</i>	<i>Health</i>	<i>Relationship To Target GC^c</i>	<i>Hours/Wk Care</i>	<i>Age Of GC</i>	<i># GC</i>	<i>Interviewer</i>	<i># Words ~</i>
Alex	61-70	Retired	Prosperous	Fair	? Step	12-120	9	4	Male	3930
Bob	51-60	FTW	Rsnbly Cmfrtbl	Very Good	Mtrnl Biol	8	2	1	Female	4570
Curt	61-70	Retired	Rsnbly Cmfrtbl	Very Good	Mtrnl Biol	16	2	7	Female	2910
David	61-70	PTW	Very Comfortable	Very Good	Mtrnl Biol	20	7	6	Female	3315
Ernest	61-70	Retired	Very Comfortable	Very Good	Mtrnl Biol	11	0.5	8	Female	8179
Fred	71-80	Retired	Just Getting Along	Good	Mtrnl Biol	20	8	7	Female	3796
Greg	51-60	Retired	Just Getting Along	Very Good	Ptrnl Step	120	4	9	Female	3604
Harry	71-80	Retired	Rsnbly Cmfrtbl	Very Good	Ptrnl Biol	30	4	6	Female	4613
Ian	61-70	Retired	Rsnbly Cmfrtbl	Very Good	Mtrnl Biol	12	9	7	Female	3720
Jack	71-80	Retired	Rsnbly Cmfrtbl	Very Good	Mtrnl Biol	24-120	9.5	1	Female	4814
Karl	61-70	FTW	Rsnbly Cmfrtbl	Very Good	Mtrnl Biol	6	4	2	Male	2330
Lance	71-80	Retired	Very Comfortable	Very Good	Ptrnl Biol	75	13	8	Female	3969
Mark	61-70	Retired	Very Comfortable	Very Good	Mtrnl Biol	10	2	3	Female	5696
Nathan	81+	PTW	Very Comfortable	Very Good	Ptrnl Biol	8	10	3	Female	5747
Perez	61-70	Retired	Rsnbly Cmfrtbl	Good	Mtrnl Biol	12	12	10	Male	5083
Rick	71-80	PTW	Very Comfortable	Very Good	Mtrnl Biol	8-120	10	2	Female	5497
Sam	51-60	Retired	Just Getting Along	Poor	Mtrnl Biol	12	6	4	Female	4211
Ted	51-60	Retired	Rsnbly Cmfrtbl	Very Good	Mtrnl Biol	18	7	4	Male	2978
Vince	61-70	Retired	Rsnbly Cmfrtbl	Good	Ptrnl Biol	72	7	7	Male	3373

Notes. ^aParticipants were not asked for their specific age; they selected their age category from a series of 10-year ranges. ~ An independent samples t-test indicates that there is no significant difference between the two interviewers in the number of words transcribed, $t(17) = 1.61$, $p = .125$, Female Mean = 4617, SD = 1348; Male Mean = 3539, SD = 1041. Abbreviations in the table: ^aFTW: full-time work; PTW: part-time work; ^bRsnbly Cmfrtbl: Reasonably comfortable; ^cGC: grandchild/ren; Mtrnl Biol: Maternal biological; Ptrnl Biol: Paternal biological

Table 2 Thematic structure of the data

<i>Master Theme & Super-Ordinate Themes^a</i>	<i>Subthemes^a</i>	<i>Example Emergent Theme^b</i>
<i>Glad Dedication</i>		
Joy (17)	Receiving	Being Loved (Ernest) Soaking It Up (Karl)
Connection (19)	Child-Centred Connecting By Flow Connection Most Important	From The Beginning (Bob) Gentle Hold (Vince) Letting Kids Be (Sam)
Dedication (13)	Grandfathering An Obligation	Core Purpose (David) Helping His Kids (Nathan) Overpowering Duty Of Care (Rick)
Tight Boundaries (14)	Handing Them Back Cautious Care	Not Pop's Role (Ernest) Not The Enforcer (Ted) Fill In The Gaps (Lance)
<i>Shift</i>		
Surprise (5)		An Unexpected Life (Nathan) Surprise (Harry)
Learning (6)		Learning Humility (Bob) Learning Tolerance (Rick)
Same As Fathering (8)		Rerun Of Fathering (Ian)
<i>Generative contexts</i>		
Passage Of Time (17)	Clash Of Worlds The Difference Is...	Adapt To New World (David) Kids Different These Days (Jack) Trouble For Kids (Perez) Youth Opens (Mark) Part Of The New Age (Sam)
Personal Concerns (7)	Health Family Pain	Being Older Is Harder (Curt) Responsibility Is Draining (Nathan)

Notes: ^a created through integrative coding; ^b created through cumulative case coding.

Numbers in brackets beside themes show distribution across the sample.

Appendix: Interview protocol

1. I'd like to talk to you about your family. I thought it would be good to start with you telling me a bit about being a grandparent to X.
  - a. How often do you see X – what are the reasons for caring for X -
  - b. What do you do with X – caregiving, transport
2. Can you describe a typical day with X?
  - a. What are the things you love doing with X, even if it isn't often?
  - b. Can you tell me about the most enjoyable experience you have had with X?
  - c. How similar or different is your relationship with X compared to your relationships with your other grandchildren?
3. How different is looking after X compared to looking after X's parent at the same age?
  - a. What did you do then that you do not do now?
  - b. What do you now that you did not do then?
4. Have your thoughts changed about fathering do you think since you were a new dad?
  - a. What things made you change do you think?
5. So what do you think is the difference between being a father and a grandfather?
6. Did becoming a grandfather change your life?
  - a. If so in what ways? (*neg, pos*)
7. Who influenced you most about being a grandfather?/ Has anyone been helpful to you as a grandfather in this time?
  - a. What were your own grandfathers like?
8. What helps you manage any things you had to deal with as a grandfather?
9. So how would you describe the grandfather you are now?
10. What are the most important lessons you have learned about being a grandfather?
11. Had you imagined that grandfathering would be like this?
12. Is there anything else you would like to mention?