

# Grandparenting as the resolution of kinship as experience

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This article argues that a population of relatively affluent retired people in a small Irish town have employed the possibilities of grandparenting to resolve many of the tensions of contemporary kinship. This includes the tension between the obligations of prescriptive relationships as against the voluntarism of friendship. This is considered against a background shift in kinship studies towards a distinction between kinship as a category and kinship as experience. Kinship as experience often now comprises a series of deep fluctuations during the life course. Experience is also extended by the growth in life expectancy. This makes it still more important that the legacy of an individual's prior experiences of kinship may be partially resolved through the experience of grandparenting. The profound consequences of grandparenting lie not in the relationship to the grandchildren but in the possibilities that grandparenting offers to recalibrate all other kinship relations. These include the relationship with one's own children, the relationship with partners, the legacy of one's prior experience of being a parent, and even the memory of the way one was parented when a child.

## Introduction and setting

Taking a very broad brush, the history of kinship studies in anthropology has included a general trajectory from an emphasis upon categorization and social structure towards a greater emphasis upon experience and contingency. There is a progression in anthropological debate but equally a parallel trajectory in the experience of kinship across many regions of the world. This article intends to take this trajectory somewhat further. Based on observations of grandparenting in a small town in Ireland, it argues that kinship is by no means a constant. The experience of kinship fluctuates through the life course. There are periods when individuals live almost entirely shorn of kinship as a practice and other periods in which most of their life is devoted to kinship.

The second unprecedented development also follows from the growth of life expectancy. The article will argue not just that the result is a much more extended experience of grandparenting but also that grandparenting has become a far more

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profound experience than had previously been appreciated. Working with a privileged community in Ireland, we can see how their circumstance has allowed this population to realize several new possibilities within grandparenting. The issue is not the relationship to grandchildren. Rather, grandparenting is used to resolve the entire history of their own kinship, including relationships to their children, their partner, and their own history. Grandparenting also leads to a partial resolution of the fundamental contradiction of contemporary kinship, that between obligation and agency.

The material for this article comes largely from a study of retired people in two fieldsites in the Dublin region of Ireland. The first, here called Cuan, is within an hour's commute from Dublin city. Daniel Miller lived in Cuan for sixteen months from February 2017 to June 2019. The population is around 10,000. Most of the population are 'blow ins' as the town has expanded rapidly with new estates from the 1970s. Typically, these people had worked in occupations such as health, education, or the civil service. The second fieldsite, studied by Pauline Garvey, was Thornhill, a pseudonym for a suburb within Dublin city itself. Both areas are largely middle class, although Thornhill is perhaps slightly more affluent than Cuan.<sup>1</sup> A jointly written monograph has been published called *Ageing with smartphones in Ireland* (Garvey & Miller 2021). The subtitle of the book is *When life becomes craft*. This phrase comes from our examination of the lives of these retired people. This showed how the concern to assert agency in determining how one acts as a grandparent is part of a much wider, perhaps unprecedented freedom to treat one's own life as a kind of craft where people strive to become the artisans of their lives.

Both ethnographies were part of the ASSA project (the Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Ageing).<sup>2</sup> This comprised eleven researchers across ten fieldsites, each engaged in approximately sixteen months of research. The three research foci were the use and consequences of smartphones, changes in the experience of middle age, and considering the use and potential of smartphones for health. Our method was primarily classic participant observation. In addition, we conducted interviews with over 200 individuals.

### The history of kinship and kinship studies

The dominant concern of earlier studies of kinship from Morgan (1871) extended through to the work of Lévi-Strauss and beyond was with the fundamental structure and logic that generate kinship as a system, for example the importance of marriage exchange for Lévi-Strauss (1969). The other major strand, associated with the functionalism of Malinowski (1930) and Radcliffe-Brown (1965), viewed kinship as the basis of social organization and the foundational idiom for almost all social order. More recently, Godelier (2011) has presented a robust defence of the huge literature that followed from these initial works as remaining highly relevant to contemporary kinship. The most significant rupture in kinship studies came with the work of Schneider (1984) and Strathern (1992). This rupture led to a reorientation to cultural ideology, for example the meaning of blood or understanding what people took to be natural within kinship (Strathern 1992) including gender differences and gender asymmetry (Rosaldo & Lamphere 1974). This, in turn, led to a greater emphasis on the power dynamics of kinship and the influence of feminist perspectives. The vitality of these cultural approaches was evident in Sahlin's (2013) recent essays on mutuality and Strathern's (2020) work on the relation.

A third direction of travel is represented by a greater concern with the flexibility of kinship. First, practice often deviated from any norm or rule. The point was made forcibly by Bourdieu (1977) in respect to marriage rules. Carsten (1997; 2000) then drew attention to the way practices could create relatedness and were not simply dictated by the relationship (see also Trawick 1990). This was certainly the case in the Caribbean, where Miller had carried out most of his ethnographic studies (e.g. Miller 1994; see also Clarke 1957). This turn to flexibility was also aligned with the changes in kinship itself as divorce rates increased and new variants such as same-sex marriage emerged. All these trends led to a greater emphasis upon experience, and the tension between kinship categories as norms and the experience of the individuals who inhabit that category (Miller 2007). Finally, there has also been growing recognition of what Bourdieu (1996) called the family as a realized category, acknowledging the role of the law, the state, and other forces that also impact the power and class relations of kinship. In turn, this has led to a greater emphasis upon contextual factors and the wider political economy in kinship studies, for example within the European context through the Kinship and Social Security (KASS) project (e.g. Heady & Kohli 2010).

This is not just a history of anthropological studies of kinship. What matters even more is the degree to which it may find its complement in evidence that people's experiences of kin relationships have themselves changed. Gillis (1997), for example, notes that traditionally the three-generational family was quite rare in Europe and that, following the growth of life expectancy, new rituals, such as Christmas, develop to help ground this changing experience of a vertically extended family. The other major shift has been in the relationship between family and friendship (Miller 2017). Many of the participants in this Irish ethnography reported that at the time they were born friendship was largely irrelevant since families were so large they encompassed almost all social interaction (see also Gray, Geraghty & Ralph 2016: 68). By contrast, this article will show how the voluntarism associated with friendship is increasingly important as an ideal within family relations also. But this has only been possible because with rising life expectancy and affluence there is more possibility of freedom to determine the degree to which life is lived in the embrace of family.

### **Kinship as experience**

These generalizations have then to be reworked within the specific regions of study. There has been considerable work on the transformation of the family in Ireland (e.g. Connolly 2015; Gray *et al.* 2016). The participants in this fieldwork had experienced a particularly rapid transformation in kinship norms and experiences. Many were born into a highly conservative ethos dominated by Catholicism, such that national legislation dictated that women in public service must give up work when they married. Within their lifetime, attitudes had transformed into the contemporary liberalism of modern Ireland. The scale of such change is evident in that in 1993 homosexuality was illegal in Ireland. Just twenty-two years later, in 2015, Ireland represented the first country to legalize same-sex marriage by popular vote and was hailed as the 'vanguard' of social progression by the *New York Times* (Hakim & Dalby 2015; for more details of the context, see Garvey & Miller 2021).

The older traditions of kinship analysis have faded, but not to irrelevance. We had research participants who admitted they were awake at 3.00 a.m. tracking down relatives on websites such as ancestry.com. The major new factor has been DNA tracking. It was also becoming quite common to meet with those newly discovered relatives from the

United States in particular. Ancestor tracking could lead to an interest in kinship as an expression of genetic connection or the various categories of cousin, but was primarily a hobby.<sup>3</sup> This interest parallels the earlier anthropological focus on kinship as a given set of categories. While this also exists as part of people's experience of kinship, however, it is a relatively minor component compared to how much time they spend with or take note of their close relatives.

No doubt in many regions and times people experienced kinship relations as fluctuating in importance over the life course rather than as a constant. But this may have developed to an unprecedented degree into periods when it dominates everyday life while at other times fading into something close to irrelevance. An infant is generally born and raised within a context saturated with kinship, a life lived amongst siblings, parents, grandparents, and cousins, though there may be some paid childcare and experience of nurseries. Once the child goes to school, mothers in particular fight to retain their influence but find this eventually to be a losing battle as the orientation is increasingly to peers (e.g. Miller 1997). If the child leaves for college education, there begins a sometimes quite extended period in which family can almost entirely disappear, especially if, as many Irish young adults do, the children go abroad for work and marry away from their natal home.

The next stage is highly variable. Almost all Miller's younger informants talked about Cuan as an ideal place to grow up in prior to teenage boredom and angst. Many therefore decide to return to Cuan when their children are born, which leads to a re-engagement with family. Parenting of young children becomes another period of extremely intense kinship. Between work and parenting young children, there is little time for any other kind of experience, especially for mothers. But when children leave home, the parents may then experience several years that are relatively kinship-light. Things change again if, as just noted, their own children return and raise families to which they are now grandparents. Today, even where the children don't return, online media have allowed for increased involvement in grandparenting at a distance. Once again, however, as the grandchildren grow up, involvement in kinship for these retired people may decline. By the time people reach their sixties and seventies, however, they are very likely to be involved either once or twice in intensive kinship interactivity as their own parents become frail and die – especially when, as is increasingly common, an elderly parent suffers from dementia and needs intensive support. Following the death of their parents, there may be a lull again until a final experience of intensive kinship when they themselves enter into frailty, requiring considerable care from their own children. This perspective aligns kinship studies more closely with increasing anthropological interest in the life course (Hockey and James 2003; see Johnson-Hanks 2002 for a critical perspective) as well as the more general issue of care within kinship practice (Alber & Drotbohm 2015).

For these research participants, such fluctuations have no bearing upon the categories of kinship, such as being a parent or cousin, which remain constant. Those have, however, been impacted by an entirely different set of changes concerning the rise of divorce, remarriage, acknowledgement of diversity in sexual orientation, and acceptance of new forms of relationship. A further factor, which will be explored in more detail below, is the shifting balance between kinship as obligation and the more friendship-like quality of voluntarism.

### The rise of grandparenting

Of all the shifts in the experience of kinship, one of the most dramatic is that of grandparenting. Prior to 1900 in most societies, most children would have been unlikely to have had two grandparents alive at any stage. In Ireland, a typical informant in our research aged around 70 may have had their first child at around 27 and then become a grandparent at around 54, which implies, given the current life expectancy of 82, being a grandparent for around twenty-eight years. With the rising age of first birth and women choosing not to have children, however, today may well be the 'golden age' of grandparenting in many regions.<sup>4</sup> As a result, there has been a marked growth in research on grandparenting, with increasing focus upon comparative studies and the diversity of cultural context (see Arber & Timonen 2012; Schwalb & Hossein 2017; Timonen 2018). The dominant concern remains that of the role of grandparents as support for parents in childcaring. Parents of children aged 3 years old in Ireland spend on average 12 per cent of their disposable income on childcare, which poses a significant barrier to women and lone parents. In a study published in 2018, 45 per cent of mothers with children aged between 3 and 5 changed their employment hours (Russell, McGinnity, Fahey & Kenny 2018). It is under these circumstances that grandparents may most likely be asked to 'help out' with childminding. There are many international parallels. In China, for example, around 70 to 80 per cent of children are raised by their grandparents as the primary carers, with the average length of children living with grandparents being eight years. Apart from care, they often provide financial support, for example for education. There is also the floating population of grandparents who leave their rural hometown to migrate to the cities to help look after grandchildren. These differences reflect the pressure on parents in the highly competitive contemporary workplace (see Bruckermann 2017; Wang in press). The interest in grandparenting as a contribution to childcare has also become extended to studies of relative reproductive success in human evolution (e.g. Volland, Chasiotis & Schiefenhövel 2005). In most regions and historical periods, the shift from obligation to sentiment that lies at the core of this article would simply not have been possible.

Irish grandparents consistently provided support in minding their grandchildren during the twentieth century, but the significance of these intergenerational relationships changed considerably over time. Early in the century, co-residence was common for grandparents, their adult children and families, whereas today it is much more common for grandparents to live apart but near their grandchildren and see them frequently. This transition is consistent with international trends (Ruggles 2007), but the decline in co-residence between grandparents and grandchildren has happened in Ireland in a much more compressed time period than elsewhere (see Gray, Geraghty & Ralph 2013). From the mid-1980s, there was an increase in married women in the workforce, and since the turn of the millennium, the proportion of Irish married women employed in the labour force has been similar to the average proportion in Europe (Laplante, Castro-Martin, Cortina & Fostik 2020). These structural changes were also accompanied by shifting ideas regarding the family and intergenerational support. In our ethnographies, it was rare for research participants to be living with their grandparents, which was usually a sign that they could afford to rent or buy their own home. More importantly, however, these changes have been accompanied with changes in the quality of intergenerational relationships and a shift in power dynamics between generations over time (Gray *et al.* 2013: 295). One example now found in many

regions (Cherlin & Furstenberg 1992) has been that parents may limit what they regard as interference by grandparents in their style of parenting.

### Active grandparenting

With some notable exceptions, studies of grandparenting in Ireland tend not to focus on the experience, but are orientated to issues of policy and the provision of childcare. The main emphasis is on lower-income families who struggle with childcare as women need to remain in work (Share & Kerrins 2009). Grandparents with tertiary education tend to provide less intensive grandparenting (McGarrigle, Timonen & Layte 2018). According to the TILDA longitudinal study of Irish adults, overall 'half (47%) of adults aged 54 to 64 years and 65 to 74 years (51%) provide regular childcare for their grandchildren for an average of 36 hours per month. Quality of life is higher in those who care regularly for their grandchildren' (Ward & McGarrigle 2018: 16). Childcare costs in Ireland are prohibitively high, and the most expensive costs are incurred in Dublin, which average about €184 per week per child. In 2020, broadsheet media reported on a national survey of working women that found that 'half of working mothers have considered giving up work due to the cost of childcare' (Holland 2020).

Active grandparenting is certainly common in affluent areas such as Thornhill. The arrangements can vary from total responsibility for the children during hours when the children's parents are working to something more scaled down. We can see the former in the example of Elaine and Dave, both of whom are in their late sixties. Dave had retired early from the civil service but has returned to work to financially assist his adult daughter Aisling, who is a lone parent and struggling. His wife, Elaine, carries the brunt of childcare for their only granddaughter, 6-year-old Alice. Alice is collected each morning at 7 a.m. and from there she is walked to primary school. Elaine collects her each day at 2 p.m. and they walk the short distance home together. Then, following a snack like crackers and cheese, she usually tries to persuade Alice to play outdoors in the back garden for a spell before homework and dinner. Generally, Alice stays until after 6 p.m., when her mother collects her.

Elaine quickly discovered that childminding involved her integration into the community of parents. Soon she was included in parents' WhatsApp groups, which were composed almost exclusively of mothers. As part of this group, Alice is regularly invited on playdates, and because Elaine is the point of contact, she manages her activities and social engagements almost exclusively. On one or two days a week – typically Fridays – Elaine invites some other local girls to her house to play, and she has thus got to know the population of parents who are regularly engaged with picking up or dropping off their girls at her house. Dave, for his part, takes responsibility for accompanying Alice to her evening sports such as football training and weekend matches and their household has thus become integrated into the activities of local families in the area, in addition to the friends and neighbours they have known for many years. Also, because Alice is in her grandparents' house so often and it is close to the school, she chooses to be there for special events such as her birthday party and 'trick or treating' at Halloween. Neither grandparent shows any resentment over this heavy responsibility they undertake and it's clear that, in part, this springs from their worries about Aisling. Occasionally they talk about her problems, and their fears regarding her mental health. Also, working as a beautician, her salary is limited and so she cannot afford to pay for a minder. Perhaps cognizant of the effort that grandparents make to the lives of the children, the local

primary school organizes 'grandparents' days' where grandparents are invited into the classrooms to meet the children and each other during the summer term.

If kinship as a practice is now something of an intermittent experience, then a key issue is how grandparenting fits within this cycle. While they have no say in determining when they become grandparents, this is less the case in relation to retirement. In some cases, people face compulsory retirement at a set point, but for many it is a carefully considered change. Not surprisingly, the arrival of a grandchild can itself prompt retirement, as several informants felt that it was now important to be potentially free to help at any time and especially in emergencies, instead of having to refuse because of work commitments (Gray *et al.* 2016: 171). When a grandchild is sick and needs a day off school, then the parent can remain at work. Bob, who worked first as a butcher and then a school caretaker, notes:

I can pick up the phone and say I am available for help, whereas when I was working, I had to check my calendar and see if I'm working late tomorrow ... With the grandchildren, it's never really a problem now. I want to see them anyway, I never see enough of them really.

Sometimes, it is the retirement activity that has to be given up, Lilian notes: 'I was quite enjoying working at the Citizens Information Bureau, but felt I had to give it up to look after my granddaughter'. She has responsibilities every day. For example, there are three grandchildren at school and two of them come five days a week to her for their lunch while another comes once a week. As later examples will show, some grandparents refuse either to retire, or indeed to have much of an active role in the care of grandchildren, but for most the coinciding of retirement and being a grandparent seems obvious and comfortable. It is an opportunity to show consideration also to one's own children, as Clara notes 'I have no regrets at all. My daughter went back to college and that was it'.

Grandparenting may also fit this emphasis upon fluctuating experiences. It is mainly something that absorbs grandparents for the period of pre- and early schooling of the grandchildren. The relationship to teenage children has its own logic and momentum. Generally, though, for participants in their late seventies or early eighties, active grandparenting and all the other kinship linkages that have accompanied their direct involvement in childcare may come to a natural conclusion. Eamonn, 73, has had one year when they were minding a grandchild a day a week, but since then, their involvement has been quite intermittent. 'I helped my son when he couldn't get a babysitter', he notes, 'but actually, there is no specific time we must be available at a certain point. It will just be a phone call saying there is a dental appointment or I've to take the kids off school early ... could ya?' Moreover, there would normally be two sets of grandparents and you might not be the one asked to help the daughter-in-law. Although they forever remain within the category of grandparent, the perspective from experience shows being a grandparent can mean either a great deal or next to nothing at different periods of later life.

The following discussion will look at various relationships separately, but ethnographically these are observed simultaneously alongside all other relationships and activities, one of which was clearly the interaction with us as ethnographers. Typically, though by no means universally, participants were impressively active, with daily schedules devoted to walks, yoga, bridge, bingo, arts, music and crafts, and more. Our monograph (Garvey & Miller 2021) describes these in detail and provides a much richer ethnographic background to this article.

Most commonly, we met with our research participants at coffee shops or activities. Sometimes these meetings would be cancelled as a grandparenting request always took precedence. Alternatively, the grandchildren would be present, crayoning or doing homework while we chatted and drank coffee. Grandparenting was entirely accepted as simply part of the everyday life of the retiree, to be interwoven within what in our monograph we argue is a period when people regard life itself as something of a craft based on this tapestry of interests and activities.

The context for active grandparenting, as observed ethnographically, is, then, this wider crafting of life. For example, Robert, recently retired from his working life as a writer, loved the idea that retirement would be a shift in gear and an opportunity to explore new interests. But it also left his life short of structure. This changed with the birth of his granddaughter, who has become a kind of focal point or grounding around which his involvement in other activities can be arranged. He and his wife generally babysit two days a week from 9 to 6. For him it is an absolute devotion in which he is entirely immersed. His daughter, recalling his behaviour in her own childhood, finds it hilarious that he will now sit patiently and watch cartoons. But unlike parenting, where he was simply too busy, this time he can closely observe, learn, and think about this experience. All this was completely unexpected but in a way fitted his general opportunistic attitude to whatever new life retirement would bring.

### **The relationship to children**

This article differs from most studies of grandparenting since the primary concern is not the relationship to grandchildren. Our study did not include children. The observed profundity of grandparenting lay rather in its capacity to transform other kinship relations. However much people adore their grandchildren, the most significant relationships are usually to their partners and children, so the focus will be on these. Prior to grandparenting, there may be a period of relative separation as teenagers and children in their twenties are out 'having a life', often at some distance. The relationship may have effectively reduced to a monthly phone call. They may then follow their children, for example, on Instagram. Many children left home with teenage feelings of constriction and frustration and sought independence. Even though, in the main, parent-child relations in our fieldsites were unusually benign, there were still many instances of teenage depression and the angst of relationship building.

Given this condition of separation, the birth of the grandchild may represent a dramatic shift in this relationship. Suddenly, your children need you again. Instead of getting a phone call once a fortnight if you're lucky, you are in constant touch. Perhaps the most commonly stated regret by grandparents is that parenting all went by too fast and they didn't take it in as it happened. Also if children left home as young adults seeking freedom, this typically leaves a legacy of at least slightly tense circumstances. But now if the children are so keen for their own parents to get involved in grandparenting, this may be experienced as of itself testimony that their own parenting must have been decent and reasonable or else their children wouldn't want them to be so engaged. Grandparenting often necessitates an intense, sometimes daily, encounter with the children, who are now no longer angst-ridden teenagers, but mature adults with their own children. The children may thereby be expected to gain a natural empathy with how they themselves were parented. There are endless comparisons. The new parent, for example, doesn't give their children food choices at mealtimes because that is how they were treated, and, on reflection, they now see the benefits of this rule. In all these



ways, the return to kinship practice as grandparents helps to resolve tensions that were the legacy of the initial parenting of their own children.

Reconciliation should not be taken for granted, however. Many new parents become extremely protective of their rights as parents to judge the appropriate mode of parenting and resent any attempt by grandparents to interfere in this activity or suggest that they know better how it should be done. Listening to life histories, our evidence is that such arguments were more common a generation ago, representing a significant chasm between highly conservative parents and the liberalism of the young. In the past in Ireland, co-residence with grandparents often meant that older generations had more say in the raising of their grandchildren. Now, studies document a shift in the balance of power where parents run independent households and can mediate grandparents' relationships with their grandchildren. Grandparents, generally, 'accept this loss of power' (Gray *et al.* 2013: 294). Additionally, we found that contemporary grandparents mainly share a liberal ethos and may regard grandparenting as an opportunity to demonstrate their continued respect for the autonomy and agency of their children, as they explicitly informed us. They are more likely to tread on eggshells in carefully monitoring themselves when discussing how the grandchildren should be raised. Cherlin and Furstenberg (1992) document precisely such a shift in the United States, from a generation of authoritative and disciplinarian grandparents to grandparents who are very wary about giving advice.

A key field of negotiation is over time spent in childcare. Grandparents generally want this to be regarded as their willing contribution, not merely an obligation. Some complain that their children make excessive demands. Francis, from Thornhill, comments that: 'Sometimes I felt they were taking me for a ride, to be honest. They'd start with "this may not suit but" but we'd always try and help them ...'. Typically, grandparents willingly help with the difficult period between the end of school and the end of the working day (Gray *et al.* 2016: 183-5). Mostly grandchildren care is reported as neither too heavy a burden nor too slight. Amanda, in her sixties, feels that life has become perfect: 'At this stage of my life, it's all coming together. I'm in a really good place, around my grandchildren and my husband. I have a very good partner. And my two kids around, you know I couldn't ask for more'. Earlier Amanda needed therapy and lacked confidence. The sense of agency that has followed from developing this kinship practice as neither too demanding nor too attenuated has been a considerable contribution to her feelings around this general improvement in her life. She or her husband will drop their granddaughter off or collect her from nursery. On some days, Amanda looks after her between nursery ending at noon and her niece taking over childcare around 3.00 p.m. She is more than happy to be involved, but grateful that this doesn't impinge too much upon her wider freedoms. This ability to create balance and choice reflects the relative affluence of both the grandparents and the parents.

Grandparents in turn experience this as the complement to their prior experience of parenting. Alice, living in a more marginalized part of Cuan, feels she was a good parent to her three children. But having successfully discharged her responsibilities as a parent, she does not feel obliged to undertake extensive grandparenting. Her daughter is desperate to go back to work and can only afford to do so if her child can be taken on by Alice full-time. But Alice has steadfastly refused:

I have never minded my grandchildren, well I did mind one for a year but then the mother became pregnant and was looking to me to take over and I said no, no it's not going to happen, I would rather

do my own job [cleaning in a shop]. She wanted to go back to work but you would be getting the two children at 7 in the morning and you would have them to 7 in the evening, instead of being their granny I would be their mammy. I was 60 at that stage and I am not going to become a mother at 60, simple as that. She is still not back to work, she will have to do what I did, which is wait till they go to school.

Having been first parents and then grandparents may also feel like a craft which one gains through experience. Gráinne remarks that it is only finally with her sixth grandchild that, using the currently fashionable idiom of ‘mindfulness’, she is ‘in the moment’.

There is another way by which grandparents ensure that care is seen as their gift rather than mere obligation. By curbing routine commitments, they retain the freedom to make exceptional efforts if the need arises. Grandparents often talk about how they will drop everything when someone is ill or there is some crisis. They are well aware that interventions at critical times tend to be more appreciated, while routine care can soon be taken for granted. This is why Olive refused to do ‘formal babysitting’ but always made an effort to help out if she was needed. Typically, she would be needed if a child was sick and couldn’t go to school, and she describes it as ‘just filling the gaps as they arise’.

Parents generally welcome grandparents’ ability to simply give them a break from unremitting childcare. One Thornhill grandmother commented wryly that her son brings the grandchildren to her house every Sunday ‘for a visit’ to give his wife a break but is soon himself snoring on the sofa. She hasn’t the heart to wake him but is aware that the ‘visit’ is mainly for his benefit. Overall, then, grandparenting provides an opportunity to repair and resolve the history of the relationship between the grandparent and their own children. The evidence from our fieldsites is that commonly both sides take full advantage of this opportunity to create this new and – what they commonly regard as – more mature, parental relationship. The implications of this emphasis on voluntary rather than obligatory care will be discussed further in the conclusion.

### **The partner relationship and shift in gender responsibilities**

Grandparenting may also be a point of resolution in partner relations. Most grandparents recall parenting as being far more of a burden on mothers than fathers, and with retirement both members of a couple have more autonomy in deciding how to spend their time. The primary impact of feminism generally came later, but brought a strong retrospective sense of asymmetry. Men are as likely to reflect wistfully upon this past as women. While women might feel that they were more exploited, men talk of having missed out on a potential highlight of their lives. For example, one man chose to take earlier retirement precisely so that he wouldn’t miss out the second time around. Grandparenting is an opportunity to redress and resolve those earlier tensions and power relations with marriage. As a result, it may now be the grandfather who seems conspicuously keen to undertake grandparenting duties. Overall, the TILDA study suggests that grandfathers spend an average of thirty-three hours a month and grandmothers thirty-seven hours a month in caring for grandchildren (Ward & McGarrigle 2018). These figures are for Ireland as a whole, which makes them compatible with our ethnographic observations that in our relatively affluent and liberal fieldsites, grandparenting may now approach gender equality. What was mainly stressed

was the potential for current engagements to compensate in part for past inequalities within our research participants' own marriages.

This may now represent a considerable contrast with grandfathering in other regions: for example, where being a grandfather is used to reinforce traditional masculinity by focusing on tasks such as fixing up the house (e.g. Tarrant 2012). Our older male informants were often more concerned to conspicuously engage in activities such as nappy changing that had previously been more the preserve of mothers. Many of them had worked in professions such as education and health, where they would have been more exposed to critiques of the feminization of care. Grandmothers are shifting in a different direction. Gráinne recognizes that her husband, who constantly worked late as a father, subsequently felt guilty for neglecting his children, which he is expiating through his devotion to the grandchildren. Gráinne, by contrast, realizes that were care for her grandchildren to become for her a routine obligation, it would bring back memories of the resentment she experienced as a mother in the form of endless self-sacrifice to her children, which would intrude on her positive relationship to being a grandmother. In this manner, grandparenting works as a resolution by being understood as the complement to the prior experience of parenting.

Furthermore, while parenting almost inevitably creates tensions and frustrations for any couple, the advent of grandparenting, with its higher degree of voluntarism, can be an expression of a new balance and love between the spouses. This possibility was most fully expressed in the way each spouse tended to incorporate the other in their discussions with us. Whichever one was speaking, they might say, 'She [the granddaughter] is the love of *our* lives'. The constant use of the plural 'our' and 'us' reflects their strong sense of partnership in sharing this experience, which is often seen as quite blissful.

### **The relationship to one's own parents and own history**

The possibility of grandparenting as resolving historical tensions in kinship practice sometimes stretches right back to the initial experience of being parented. As a highly educated cohort, these informants were often quite knowledgeable about the popular psychology of parenting and there were frequent references to the concept of attachment and associated theorists such as Bowlby (1969). In addition, Miller interviewed several psychotherapists about their experience of older people coming to them for treatment, and they tended to reinforce the same arguments using the same language. A common reflection by grandparents upon their own childhood was described as the difficulty in creating satisfactory attachments. Their childhood had often been a time of poverty, with very large families where it was hard to stand out and not feel competitive with siblings for parental attention. The context was, on the one hand, a strict Catholicism, but, on the other, informants also very often alluded to parental alcoholism, implying that this was a common problem at that time. Visiting a psychotherapist, they would talk about not having received the love they craved when they were children.

Often, today, the issue is cathartically resolved, not necessarily through therapy but through seeing these memories as actively repudiated through making their experience of being parents and then grandparents modelled in precise opposition to their own experience. They see themselves giving love, attention, and freedom as the systematic repudiation of what they recall as coldness, inattention, and harsh discipline. A common claim that is now part of popular discourse on these matters is for people to inform us that there are cycles that descend the generations, especially cycles of what is now

termed dysfunctionality. Using that discourse, they now see their grandparenting as an opportunity to break those cycles and replace them with entirely positive and supportive feelings – these good attachments. These are aspirations which would have been already an ambition of their parenting, but by this stage they have that much more freedom, leisure, and affluence to realize their ideals of nurturing and care.

Having worked in an academic institution, though not herself an academic, Amanda is quite analytical about these complex intergenerational linkages. Quoting attachment theory, her starting point is that she quite resented her children. She ‘wanted to be out all the time’ and was just experiencing that sense of emancipation that came with the first real presence of feminism on the national stage in the 1970s, led by vocal female journalists within a context where the majority of adult women in Ireland were housewives and mothers. So parenting was not the opportunity to resolve her kinship history. By contrast, she can reconcile any such tensions when it comes to her grandchildren as an experience of unequivocal love.

These observations then recast the earlier discussion of grandparenting as the repair, in some sense, of parenting. As previously noted, the desire of adult children for active involvement by their parents becomes the ultimate valorization of Amanda’s own parenting, suggesting that her children neither resented her, or, equally important, were unaware of her resentment of them.

It certainly doesn’t always work out this way. Miriam is grieving deeply for her 16-year-old grandson who committed suicide. She relates his suicide to the depression that his mother was going through at the time, while Miriam had become quite a distant figure, partly because she had very problematic issues with her own parents. Sometimes, ‘dysfunctional’ cycles are not resolved but continue down the generations. But more often the ethnography revealed how grandparenting becomes an opportunity for the cathartic resolution of a history of tensions and failures, partly because the grandparents have reached a point in their lives and circumstance where this is finally possible.

### **Smartphones and the extended family**

A surprisingly important factor in the achievement of balance in all these relationships is the smartphone, and particularly the rise of WhatsApp. As Tropp (2019) has recently argued, situating grandparents in the digital age has been instrumental in public (and commercial) acknowledgement of the vitality of contemporary grandparenting. Here, as in several of the ASSA fieldsites, the smartphone has facilitated a partial reversal of the shift from extended to nuclear families, perhaps the single most important historical trajectory of kinship. This is evident in the fact that most new housing around the world is now geared to the nuclear family.

The reversal of this trajectory was especially clear in the Irish and also the ASSA Brazilian fieldsite (Duque 2022). It follows from the way smartphones have developed into what in our comparative book (Miller *et al.* 2021) we call ‘The Transportal Home’. The term implies that a smartphone is as much a place we live within as a device we use. The problem posed by the traditional extended family was that living within a shared home is represented as a burden and this intensity of kinship in most places is no longer an ideal. On the other hand, the reduction of the extended family to meeting on a few formal occasions such as Christmas, weddings, and, in Ireland especially, funerals was often regarded as too attenuated and ritualized. People often regret losing touch with their cousins. In studying WhatsApp groups, it soon became clear that these are now commonly created around the incorporation of wider family relations,

often starting with the extended group required to look after a sick relative, but then retained as a family group. WhatsApp groups work well because the extended family remain sufficiently distant to ensure that kinship is not overly burdensome, yet are more informal, frequent, and relaxed than just meeting at ritual occasions.<sup>5</sup> The result is a partial return to extended family relations as part of everyday life.

WhatsApp is also ideal for the kind of everyday negotiation and recalibration of grandparenting that helps facilitate these various relationships. Do the children want the grandparents to read them a story that night, or have they been too naughty to deserve this treat? Is it more convenient for Nana or Grandpa to pick them up from school since Daddy is working late? There is the daily circulation of images and videos through WhatsApp based on the parent's acknowledgement that only the grandparents would fully appreciate just how cute the baby is today. Anything can be decided or recalibrated at that moment, which we call *perpetual opportunism*, and which is a major consequence of smartphones more generally. For family relationships, the smartphone has given literal resonance to the expression 'playing it by ear'.

Ending with reflections on the smartphone is important for this article, because the narrative has examined each relationship in turn. But ethnographically what one encounters is the more holistic experience of their simultaneity, as grandparents negotiate involvements that bear on partners, children, their own history, and of course the grandchildren themselves. The sheer efficiency, speed, and opportunism of smartphones allow for almost instant recalibration of these multiple relationships to a degree that is unprecedented and thereby help to bring out the evidence behind the arguments of this article much more clearly.

### The implications for kinship studies

This article is situated within more general changes in Irish kinship. New sensibilities such as feminism and new practices such as rising divorce and same-sex marriage have extended the variability of kinship, while the growth in life expectancy has its own impact such as making the experience of grandparenting more prominent (Gray *et al.* 2016: 167-70). The wider and rapid rise of liberal Ireland is reflected in legislation for marriage equality, which was fostered by intra-family discussion (Healy, Sheehan & Whelan 2016), and the recent repeal of the 8th amendment in the Irish constitution which legalized abortion, and for which the vote in these two fieldsites was particularly high. These changes in attitudes are also reflected in the wider media (Garvey 2020). But again the situation may remain very different in rural or western Ireland from these two relatively affluent middle-class populations in the Dublin region. Looking beyond Ireland where circumstances are less benign, new generational configurations may indeed create conflicts rather than resolutions (e.g. Thelen 2005).

The evidence here sometimes elides with but also shifts away from various trajectories of kinship studies as applied to the behaviour of grandparents. To take the excellent analysis of grandparenting in rural China, Bruckermann (2017) observes that through caregiving, grandmothers could reconcile previously frustrated desires to raise healthy children. This tallies with one of the primary arguments of our article: that these Irish grandparents are influenced by their prior experience of parenting and in some sense compensate for those experiences. But the differences are perhaps more striking, since the Irish case doesn't fit as well with the growing interest in relationality, reciprocity, or the family as a realized category – factors found not just in Bruckermann but in most recent anthropological studies of kinship.

The reasons for this divergence build upon two prior discussions of kinship by Miller. In the first, Miller (2007) queried the extension of the trajectory towards a relational approach that had been developed by Carsten (2000) and others. He argued that in some places, such as patterns of inheritance within the United Kingdom, kinship as a category could be impervious to kinship as a practice. The evidence around grandparents in Ireland confirms this. For most people, the degree to which they ignored their grandchildren or were extremely active in grandparenting made no difference at all to the extent to which they were identified as grandparents. There are certain areas, such as locating diasporic relatives through DNA, which still focus upon kinship as a category. This also is a move away from the stress on the family as the realization of normative categories (e.g. Bourdieu 1996). Within this article, accordance with the normative is almost irrelevant to one's kinship status.

The point is that changes have occurred both in the study of kinship and in the experience of kinship. In both fields, we retain certain instances where what matters remains kinship as a set of categories. These may, however, have diminished in importance as part of the experience of kinship where there has been a trajectory towards greater flexibility. The Irish evidence shows a separation between the category of being a grandparent and the degree to which an individual is devoted to the practice of grandparenting. In turn, this supports the core argument that grandparents seek to reduce the sense that they are fulfilling mere kinship obligation and allows them to shift towards their ideal that in grandparenting they are expressing their individual desire or willingness to help under a condition of relative freedom, with the feeling that they could refuse. This means that they can feel they are engaged as a direct expression of their love and concern for their children and grandchildren. This leads to the second discussion (Miller 2017), in which it was argued that the last few decades have seen a shift from kinship as a dominant idiom reflected in the practice of fictive kinship to friendship as a dominant idiom, creating the kind of fictive friendship we encounter when, on meeting, one person says to another that this is my mother/brother, but also my best friend.

The shift to a model of friendship is closely tied to the degree to which kinship is associated with obligation and friendship with a more voluntaristic and freely given attachment which allows for a greater stress on sentiment. This is best expressed through the common assertion in respect to grandparenting that 'you can always give them back'. This is said even when in practice it is not at all true, because there are agreed expectations of childcare during the day or week. It remains important that grandparents feel that ultimately they are expressing their free choice: that they can have all the blissful love and tenderness that is associated with kinship as an expression of obligation and dependency while also retaining the potential to control their degree of commitment to this relationship. This again is contrasted with the memory of unremitting obligation associated, especially by mothers, with bringing up their own children.

Recently, Strathern (2020: 145-6, 154, 161) has discussed Miller's argument. Her book is concerned with the way both kinship and friendship act as idioms that stand for much wider values and provide a broader context in a far more sweeping discussion of the relation. She situates her discussion in an earlier commentary by Pitt-Rivers (1973) on Fortes (1969) with respect to the place of sentiment and amity within kinship (Strathern 2020: 152-5). In the light of our argument, it is likely that the crucial point of this article for Strathern would be that ultimately it is not an article about friendship,

but one about grandparenting, a category of kinship. This eruption of the ideology of voluntaristic sentiment associated with friendship found here at the heart of kinship thereby reinforces what Strathern sees as the cyclical element in the relation, as both ideals and practice, between friendship and kinship. It is a kind of polarity in which ends can be swapped, becoming the constitutive bond between these kinds of relationship, both of which are present in this contemporary grandparenting.

The article started with the observation that kinship as experience now shifts radically during the life course, perhaps to an unprecedented degree, irrespective of the constancy of kinship as a category of identity. By the end, what seems to be equally important is, as the Irish evidence suggests, a shift in kinship practice towards grandparents being able to feel that they are acting freely as a genuine expression of their own desires. What this does is to realign kinship with modern sensibilities as to what is now viewed as the foundational authenticity of the relationship itself, which may well be cyclical, as suggested by Strathern, but for now seems to eschew obligation, and see authentic sentiment mainly in voluntaristic sentiment.

Finally, the article showed that this is not something that pertains to grandparenting in isolation. Partly because grandparenting occurs towards the latter segment of life, there are a whole series of ways in which it is hugely significant as potentially the resolution of the prior history of that individual's experiences of kinship, including the recollection of parenting itself as unremitting obligation. It forms part of our wider argument (Garvey & Miller 2021) about how life can become craft. Of course, our fieldwork encompassed examples of grandparenting where everything went wrong, where the main interaction was argument because the grandparents hated the way their children parented their grandchildren, but also cases of such bitter prior resentment that the grandparents never even got to engage with their grandchildren in the first place. Nevertheless, the evidence documented in this article shows that the deployment of grandparenting as the resolution of kinship as experience is more common and probably now typical.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See the Pobal Deprivation Index, which uses census data to measure the relative wealth or disadvantage on a national scale. Three dimensions of affluence/disadvantage are identified: Demographic Profile, Social Class Composition, and Labour Market Situation. Using the Pobal Portal, Thornhill is largely 'affluent' and 'marginally above average'. Cuan is more mixed. The index identifies it as largely 'affluent' and 'above average'. However, it also has some small localized pockets of 'below average' and 'disadvantaged'. Available at: <http://maps.pobal.ie/>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/assa/>.

<sup>3</sup> An emphasis upon the diaspora should not imply that families have generally dispersed. According to TILDA, an extensive longitudinal study of the Irish population, three-quarters of all adults aged 50 and over

live in close proximity to at least one of their children (see <http://tilda.tcd.ie/publications/reports/pdf/w1-key-findings-report/ExecutiveSummary.pdf>).

<sup>4</sup> According to Early Childhood Ireland (2020), Ireland is 'still lagging behind all other EU countries' in terms of the investment in early years care. Irish parents are currently entitled to apply for up to forty hours of subsidized pre-school childcare. Public expenditure in the sector currently comprises approximately 0.2 per cent of GDP, versus the 1.9 per cent of GDP invested by Sweden. The average fee for full-time childcare is €184 per week or €736 a month. Fees tend to be higher in Dublin than elsewhere (Doyle 2019).

<sup>5</sup> For a more extended discussion of social media as a kind of Goldilocks solution to kinship as neither too warm nor too cold, see Miller (2016).

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## Être grands-parents, ou la résolution des liens de parenté par l'expérience

### Résumé

Une population de retraités relativement aisés d'une petite ville d'Irlande a utilisé les possibilités de leur statut de grands-parents pour résoudre de nombreuses tensions des liens de parentés contemporains,

notamment entre les obligations de relations prescriptives et le volontarisme de l'amitié. Les auteurs examinent cette évolution dans le contexte d'une distinction, de plus en plus affirmée au sein des études de la parenté, entre parenté en tant que catégorie et en tant qu'expérience. Aujourd'hui, l'expérience des liens de parenté est souvent soumise à une série de profondes fluctuations au cours de la vie. Elle se prolonge aussi avec l'allongement de l'espérance de vie. De ce fait, la possibilité que l'expérience antérieure des liens de parenté se résolve peut-être partiellement par l'expérience de la grand-parentalité devient encore plus importante. Être grands-parents a des conséquences profondes, non pas à cause de la relation avec les petits-enfants mais par les possibilités qu'offre ce statut de revisiter toutes les autres relations de parenté : relations avec les enfants, avec le conjoint, traces laissées par sa propre expérience de la parentalité, voire souvenirs d'enfance de ses propres parents.

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