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Exploring the Role UK Grandfathers Play in Parenting Culture: Intermittent Intensive Grandfathering

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Ben Kerrane 

Manchester Metropolitan University Business School, UK

Katy Kerrane 

University of Liverpool Management School, UK

Shona Bettany 

University of Huddersfield, UK

Abstract

Grandparents play an increasingly active caregiving role in contemporary family life. However, specific exploration of grandfatherhood and its practice is rare. This article explores how intensive parenting norms inform men's performance of grandfathering in the United Kingdom, with ageing offering men a 'second chance' to (grand)parent in ways qualitatively different from fathering. In-depth interviews with UK grandfathers revealed that while they displayed 'involved' grandfatherhood and practised elements of intensive grandfathering, this was often in typically masculine ways. Men embraced the competitive nature of intensive parenting, particularly around educational development, and advancement. Other elements of intensive parenting (e.g. expert-dependence, over-protectiveness and self-sacrifice) were, however, overlooked. Accordingly, we introduce 'intermittent intensive grandfathering', recognising discontinuities in the childcare tasks that participants would/would not involve themselves.

Keywords

families, gender, grandfathering, grandparenting, hegemonic masculinity, intensive parenting, masculinity

Corresponding author:

Ben Kerrane, Manchester Metropolitan University Business School, Oxford Road, Manchester, M15 6BH, UK.

Email: b.kerrane@mmu.ac.uk

Introduction

Underpinned by high childcare costs, the rise of dual income families and women's increased employment, grandparents in the United Kingdom provide (on average) eight hours of childcare each week to their grandchildren (Buchanan and Rotkirch, 2018). Grandparents often fill a parenting gap (May et al., 2012) and are described as 'the new army of proxy parents' (Buchanan and Rotkirch, 2018: 141). The presence of grandparents in the lives of children is well documented and elements of intensive grandparenting have been identified, for example, in many East Asian countries (Lo and Lindsay, 2022) and across many African and Latin American societies (Hossain et al., 2018). Less is known, however, about the practice of grandparenting in the UK and how this may be shaped by broader cultural aspects of parenting, including intensive parenting ideals (Harman et al., 2022).

Intensive parenting, involving self-sacrifice and highly labour-intensive parenting, permeates idealisations of 'good' parenting (Hays, 1996). Despite much criticism (see, for example, Christopher, 2012; O'Reilly, 2016), intensive parenting remains the normative standard by which much parenting is judged (Arendell, 2000; O'Brien Hallstein, 2017). Considering the high involvement of grandparents in children's lives, Timonen (2020) asks whether 'intensive grandparenting' likely informs grandparenting approaches, which has recently been explored with UK grandmothers (Harman et al., 2022). Studies of UK grandfatherhood, however, are relatively rare (Mann et al., 2016), although it is important to acknowledge the intense role that grandfathers beyond the UK have played within the family for some time (see, for example, Hossain et al., 2018; Lo and Lindsay, 2022).

Recognising the paucity of research on grandfathers based in the UK (Mann et al., 2016) and suggestion that grandparenting may be shaped by intensive parenting discourse (Harman et al., 2022; Timonen, 2020), we explore how intensive parenting ideology informs grandfatherhood in the UK. We return to ideas surrounding the 'assertion and transformation of masculinities in later life' (Mann et al., 2016: 594), recognising that men play additional roles beyond fatherhood over the life course (Morgan, 2004). Hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987) and traditional masculine values (physical toughness, competitiveness) inform gender performance and display. Within the family, many men (and western men, in particular) have been driven by breadwinning ideology, which largely positions fathers as economic providers, removed from the softer side of parenting (Miller, 2011). While such gender norms appear to be weakening, they are not disappearing between generations (Hodkinson and Brooks, 2023). The provision of care is considered the antithesis of (hegemonic) masculinity (Brannen and Nilsen, 2006). Old age, however, offers men 'transformative potential' (Tarrant, 2013) to counter hegemonic masculinity (Sorenson and Cooper, 2010): to nurture grandchildren in ways rarely experienced with their own children, given earlier employment restriction (Ojala and Pietilä, 2020).

Drawing on qualitative interview data from grandfathers living in the UK, we show how participants adhere to elements of intensive parenting ideology, albeit through continued assertion of traditional masculine values. Our analysis highlights how participants want to 'do' grandfatherhood in qualitatively different ways to fatherhood,

pursuing intimate and connected relationships with grandchildren. However, the legacy of hegemonic masculinity informs their grandfather performances. We demonstrate how our grandfathers from the UK embrace elements of intensive parenting norms (e.g. competition, advancement) while disregarding others (e.g. expert-dependence, over-protectiveness, self-sacrifice). We introduce *intermittent intensive grandfatherhood* to recognise how grandfathers act as bricoleurs in caregiving accounts: intensively (grand) parenting in certain aspects of grandchildren's lives, but not all.

The Move towards Intensive (Grand)Parenting?

The intensification of parenting practices, particularly in western cultures, is well acknowledged (Marx and Steeves, 2010). Parenting has become a complex and resource-intensive project intertwined with neoliberal cultural scripts (Faircloth, 2020). While intensive parenting is gender-neutral, much research focuses on mothers, since they remain the primary target for such cultural messages (Faircloth, 2020; Hays, 1996). Intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) requires intensified labour and significant resource to ensure both the protection of the priceless, innocent child and their later success (Wall, 2010). Parents, notably mothers, are expected to display devotion to the child, which is financially and emotionally demanding (Lareau, 2003), and are portrayed as needing expert parenting guidance (Lee et al., 2014). The social standing of parents has become contingent upon the child's accomplishments, parental efforts and educational outcomes, placing parents in competition with each other (Wall, 2010).

Intensive parenting is, however, criticised for setting unrealistic, idealised expectations (O'Reilly, 2016), underpinned by normative assumptions that position 'good' mothers as white, heterosexual, middle-class and married (O'Brien Hallstein, 2017). 'Alternative' motherhood performances are thus identified. Working-class mothers, for example, view the child as autonomous and 'focus on the accomplishment of natural growth' (Lareau, 2002: 748), rather than feeling ultimately responsible for child development. Some middle-class mothers instead foster 'extensive' mothering, delegating care work to other women (e.g. childcare, relatives or nannies) (Christopher, 2012). From a cultural perspective, many African American women also reject holding mothers accountable for childcare/development, enrolling a community of 'othermothers' to share care work among community and kin (Collins, 2009; Dow, 2016). In this 'village' approach, grandparents are often deemed the 'natural choice' to raise children in parental absence (Dow, 2016: 192), although emphasis remains on female members.

Despite criticism, intensive parenting remains the global cultural script of 'proper' parenting, cutting across race and class (O'Brien Hallstein, 2017). It remains a 'normative standard' against which parenting practices are judged (Arendell, 2000: 1195), particularly in western cultures (Hays, 1996). With fathers becoming more involved in parenting (Hodkinson and Brooks, 2023), scholarship has shifted to consider how men grapple with intensive, 'involved' fatherhood norms (Dermott, 2014). While men are found to experience risks and anxieties relating to financial provision, they are suggested to draw on masculine resources of competition and autonomy, which renders them more immune to feelings of worry or guilt that they are not parenting 'properly', vis-a-vis mothers (Shirani et al., 2012).

Though UK men may experience intensive parenting differently (Shirani et al., 2012), little is known about how intensive parenting norms shape UK grandfatherhood, and grandfatherhood more broadly (Timonen, 2020). This is perhaps unsurprising, as parents in the UK characteristically adopt an individualised, competitive approach to caregiving, which typically portrays grandparents (and grandfathers, in particular) as ‘not to be trusted’ or ‘up to date on the most recent parenting methods and advice’ (Faircloth, 2020: 152). Yet given changes in family life (e.g. dual-income families, women’s increased employment, rising divorce rates, migration), UK grandparents are increasingly involved in childcare. Grandparenting is thus conceptualised as continued intensive parenting, with grandparents offering support to their adult children through grandchild care (Jamieson et al., 2018; Rotkirch and Buchanan, 2016).

Harman et al.’s (2022) recent study offers insight into how the intensification of parenting practices shapes UK grandmothers’ roles. They find that grandmothers had mixed feelings about their involvement in grandchildren’s educational outcomes; often ‘stepped back’ from the competitive aspect of intensive parenting; and complied with the grandparental norm of non-interfering (Mason et al., 2007). While grandmothers prefer to disengage from competitive investitures of time and concerted cultivation (Lareau, 2003) and place primacy on enjoyment ‘for its own sake’ (Harman et al., 2022: 52), less is known about the intensification of grandfather practices in the UK.

Exploring Grandfather Role Differences

Various categories (e.g. age, class, gender, ethnicity, lineage) shape grandparenting practices (Timonen, 2020) with parents mediating grandparent/child involvement (May et al., 2012). Exclusive investigations of grandfatherhood are rare (Mann et al., 2016), with grandfatherhood largely understood through comparison with grandmothers or grandmothers’ voices alone (Mann et al., 2016).

No one grandfather experience exists, with grandfatherhood shaped by socio-historic patterns of cultural traditions and social expectations (Rotkirch and Buchanan, 2016). Within many Chinese, African and Latin American cultures, for example, grandparents are found to often ‘parent’ grandchildren while parents migrate for employment (Hossain et al., 2018). Co-parenting arrangements are also reported between parents/grandparents in many Asian cultures (McHale et al., 2014), with South Asian grandparents considered ‘an additional set of parents’ (Hossain et al., 2018: 283). In their study of families in Hong Kong, Lo and Lindsay (2022) similarly highlight how grandparents, including grandfathers, performed involved and intense roles with their grandchildren (Lo and Lindsay, 2022). Within the context of sub-Saharan Africa, the HIV and AIDS pandemic necessitated the older generation’s prolonged caregiving role for both adult children and surviving grandchildren (Cantillon et al., 2021). Factors including poverty, unemployment, multi-generational living, high childcare costs and illness thus firmly cement grandparents in the lives of many children (Hossain et al., 2018), with elements of intensive grandfathering arguably evident across the globe (Lo and Lindsay, 2022).

Within the UK, grandfathers are usually positioned outside the immediate nuclear family structure, resulting in a passive grandparental style founded on self-reliance and decision making based on individual need (Buchanan and Rotkirch, 2018). The economic

devaluation of unproductive, ageing bodies portrays grandparents as burdensome: in need of care, rather than active caregivers (Hossain et al., 2018). Losing authority as family leaders, many grandfathers based in the UK characteristically focus on self-fulfilment and leisure time (Hossain et al., 2018). Accordingly, they are stereotypically labelled as authoritarian and distant (Mann, 2007), explained through their earlier absence in the emotional work of childcare (Kimmel, 2012) and the construction of (grand)parenting as feminised (Mann, 2007).

For many men in the UK, breadwinner ideology underpins their identity (Sorenson and Cooper, 2010). While breadwinning norms may be weakening (Brannen and Nilsen, 2006; Dermott, 2014), even contemporary fathers with progressive gender views experience normative pressures to ‘fit care involvement around breadwinning’ (Hodkinson and Brooks, 2023: 37). Men’s lesser caregiving role is associated with enduring notions of hegemonic masculinity (Mann et al., 2016), which refers to dominant forms of masculinity (e.g. physical toughness, power, competitiveness) maintained by subjugating ‘alternative’ masculinities (Connell, 1987), such as those surrounding caregiving (Brannen and Nilsen, 2006).

The limited studies of UK grandfatherhood find that men engage in codified masculine activities with grandchildren (e.g. sport, outdoor pursuits) and position themselves as lesser/deficient to grandmothers (Mann et al., 2016). Although contemporary grandfathers in the UK are found to be more hands-on than previous generations, hegemonic masculine values appear to endure. Mann et al. (2016), for example, find a softening of masculinity apparent (with British men keen to distance themselves from an inactive and passive (‘old’) grandfather role). However, men often re-affirmed elements of their previous connections to traditional masculinity (e.g. acting as father figures, engaging in boisterous play, being an educator) in their everyday grandfatherly caregiving performances. This was particularly evident where grandfathers assumed a ‘surrogate father’ role during family disruption (Mann et al., 2016).

Social class also shapes grandfatherhood. For example, Ojala and Pietilä (2020) find that within their Finnish sample, men from lower socio-economic groups are more likely to provide grandchild care to facilitate parental participation in the labour market (Ojala and Pietilä, 2020). In the context of Belgium, working-to-middle-class grandparents are found to act as part-time, ‘replacement parents’, and heavily involve themselves in the domestic sphere – whereas middle-to-upper-class grandparents are found to prioritise leisure time over caregiving (Gauthier, 2002).

In this article we explicitly focus on grandfathering in the United Kingdom, recognising that UK grandfathers play more pronounced caregiving roles than previous generations (Buchanan and Rotkirch, 2018). Weakening gender norms offer ageing men ‘transformative potential’ (Tarrant, 2013), or a ‘second chance’ (Jamieson et al., 2018), to counter hegemonic masculine values (Sorenson and Cooper, 2010) by nurturing grandchildren in ways rarely experienced with their own children, given breadwinning norms (Ojala and Pietilä, 2020). While aspects of grandfatherhood akin to intensive parenting have been identified in many cultures (Lo and Lindsay, 2022), we shift research focus to explore whether such practices are evident within UK families. Accordingly, informed by the theoretical lens of hegemonic masculinity and intensive parenting norms, we ask: *how does intensive parenting ideology and hegemonic masculinity inform the grandfather role in the United Kingdom?*

The Study

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive approach to data collection and captured data through in-depth interviews with 22 grandfathers from the UK. We recognise different historic and cultural performances of grandfatherhood, as our literature review reveals. Our study is, however, grounded in the accounts of grandfathers based in the UK, a point we acknowledge in the Discussion section. Participants were initially recruited via personal contacts and were purposefully selected (Patton, 2002) to ensure that they offered regular care to their grandchildren on their own (most notably around school closure, and when grandmothers pursued their own interests/paid employment). Parents of children attending two schools in north-west England were asked to discuss the project with grandfathers, with grandfather contact details subsequently provided (with participants' consent). The grandfather respondents subsequently recommended one further grandfather from their network to participate (to avoid restricting understanding to established friendship groups alone).

Participants (58–78 years old) had several grandchildren (aged 5–17 years) and lived within an approximate 20-minute drive from at least one grandchild. Most participants had retired (although some worked part-time/were towards the latter career phase). The men were white British, middle class and biological grandfathers, which we recognise is far from ideal, and was likely informed by our approach to recruitment. However, given the private nature of family life, with male family members a hard-to-reach group, we felt that our recruitment approach was sensible.

Interviews lasted 70–90 minutes. All interviews, apart from two, occurred at participants' homes: one interview was conducted at work, and one by telephone. Home interviews were particularly useful, with participants showing photographs of their grandchildren and grandchild paraphernalia (e.g. pictures, drawings and hand-made items they had been gifted). The lead author conducted each interview. In terms of his positionality, he is a male researcher who grew up without a grandfather figure. While he is a father, he is younger than the research participants and not a grandfather. During interviews, participants often commented that their own children were of a similar age and generation to him. We feel that his non-grandfather status, and lack of experience of being grandfathered, prompted participants to offer a deeper account of their grandfather practices. They offered rich explanation to help the researcher to understand their lived experiences and often asked if extra detail or commentary was needed. This seemingly departs from other studies of (grand)fatherhood, where 'male talk about fathering was not highly elaborated' (Brannen and Nilsen, 2006: 340).

Interviews began by asking participants to talk about their family, in particular, their grandchildren, to become familiar with their family tree. The men were then encouraged to reflect and discuss key milestones in their grandfatherhood journey; their everyday grandfatherhood practices; what they liked, or otherwise, about caring for their grandchildren, and how they spent time with them; if relationships had changed over time; and how/if their grandfather practices affected relations with other family members. Although our focus was on grandfathering, the men's accounts inevitably drew on comparisons with their earlier fatherhood experiences. Continuity and change between generational roles, as noted elsewhere (Brannen and Nilsen, 2006), broadly reflects our study's findings.

Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were collected and handled according to strict ethical processes, informed by the researchers' institutions and the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice. To protect the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms are used throughout. Data were interpreted using thematic analysis, in which themes were data-driven and not coded to fit a pre-determined coding frame (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Data analysis began with authors reading each interview transcript. Notes were compared between the team and a new reading of the complete transcriptions occurred. Themes were developed using a continuous part-to-whole and whole-to-part movement, both within the data and between data and existing literature.

Findings

First, we discuss participants' motivations for involved grandfatherhood (informed by their largely deficient fatherhood role), despite experiencing role uncertainty during their transition to grandfatherhood. We reveal a competitive side to grandfatherhood as the men sought to be favoured by their grandchildren. Next, we illustrate that although exhibiting a more involved grandfather style, participants often violated parental instruction – and sometimes resisted elements of intensive parenting ideology. Finally, we highlight that while our UK grandfathers were happy to perform elements of intensive grandparenting, they placed restriction on the tasks they (and their female partner) performed, revealing glimpses of an *intermittent* style of intensive grandfathering.

Intergenerational Repair and Competitive Grandfathering

The transition to grandfatherhood prompted participants to reflect on their earlier fatherhood role. Regardless of their generation (e.g. baby boomers, generation X), most highlighted their absence in their children's upbringing, explained through enduring breadwinner ideology. Most participants recognised how the structural features of work negatively held them back from playing an intensive parenting role (Sorenson and Cooper, 2010), acknowledging their 'minimal involvement' with their young children.

Grandfatherhood, however, provided opportunity to atone for their poor or absent fathering practices, allowing them to play a more prominent role in their grandchildren's lives. Luke (now retired) explained:

When my children were young, I was working long hours and often away. I was one of those dads where I was out the door before the kids were up and then when I got back from work, gave them a kiss before bed, and that was it. I missed out on their childhood. Being a grandfather, I have time to be more hands-on, and I love spending time with them . . . it makes me feel better, not make the same mistakes again. If I'm honest, I can be a better granddad than I was a dad.

Across our dataset, the men discussed 'remorse' and 'embarrassment' with their earlier fatherhood performance, which they now recognised as deficient. This motivated intergenerational repair through being 'a better granddad than I was a dad'. Competition with

their former selves was clear, with the men keen to out-perform their father role, as Mark explained: ‘with not being there, I realise that’s no good for children. With my grandkids, I’m pushing myself to be the better granddad and not fall back into old ways.’

Although participants discussed undertaking both practical (e.g. collecting children from school, driving them to extra-curricular activities, preparing meals) and emotional work (Mann and Leeson, 2010), they recognised how mundane childcare for infants often fell to their female partner. Given the historic gendered nature of care provision, and men’s absence in early childcare, most participants reported feeling ill-prepared for grandfatherhood. This was particularly acute for first-born/infant grandchildren, as Steven commented:

The problem with not doing much first time around, when my own children were little, particularly in the early days, is because you didn’t do it first time, you’ve no clue what you’re doing. Changing nappies, sterilising bottles, making formula. What little I did back then, I’d forgotten about. I felt out of my depth, which wasn’t pleasant, so to begin with, I left all that to my wife.

The lack of skill in caring for new-born children relegated participants to the background of early grandparenting. George and Clive were, however, notable exceptions, with their previous experience of prolonged unemployment and female breadwinning meaning they were around more (and more hands-on) when their own children were young, as George explained:

I was a bit rusty with helping out to start, but I think that was more to do with old age than not knowing what to do . . . Being out of work for so long, I did the bulk of the childcare when mine were small and my wife was the one at work.

George and Clive’s involved fatherhood, and earlier ‘hands-on’ fatherhood style, was unusual across our dataset.

As grandchildren aged, however, and ‘got interesting’, participants carved out specific activities and exclusive solo-grandparenting time, with the men gaining confidence in their new role (caring for grandchildren without their female partners present). Frank illustrates:

It took a while for me to fall into my stride, so when they got a bit older, I felt more comfortable doing things with them on my own. Like cricket, that was my thing . . . I’d always enjoyed playing cricket and we’d often go off and watch matches together. I’d buy them a drink and a packet of crisps at the club afterwards. It was our special place.

The ‘special time’ that participants offered to older grandchildren often revolved around ‘doing activities’, such as playing sport, outdoor pursuits and taking extraordinary trips, which are stereotypically masculine. Outings allowed men opportunity to escape the feminised space of the home, yet trips to the cinema, sporting events and shopping centres were expensive, reflecting the financial privilege of our middle-class sample (Tarrant, 2013). The men were keen to ringfence these singularised activities as solo-grandparent time to bond with their grandchild(ren) (while grandmothers pursued

their own leisure time, voluntary or part-time work). Jack, for example, enjoyed solo time teaching his grandson (Trevor) to swim, and recalled his annoyance when ‘other’ grandparents attempted to ‘muscle in’ on his activity:

I’d been doing the swimming for years. It wasn’t easy, and it took a bit of work, but I got him swimming eventually . . . Trevor’s other grandparents live further away, and they come over every now and then. They’re not as hands-on as me. They tried to muscle in and take him swimming, but I was having none of it. I put my foot down on that one, that was something I did with him, not them.

To protect ‘special’ time with grandchildren, participants often incorporated treats (e.g. unhealthy food/fizzy drinks) and demonstrated competition with other grandparents:

it sounds daft, but I want to be the one grandparent that they want to come and see . . . I don’t want to be the one they dread visiting, you know, the one they make excuses not to see. I want to be the one they come to if they need something. (Jacob)

Jacob’s comment highlights participants’ need to feel valued and needed, recognising enduring hegemonic masculine values. In seeking to be the ‘favourite’ grandparent, participants were willing to spoil their grandchildren, unlike grandmothers who were less keen to counter healthy eating concerns underpinned by parents (Cappellini et al., 2019). The men wanted to offer enjoyable experiences to their grandchildren, aware that their grandfather–child time was finite, and participants deliberately moved away from the oft-discussed role of grandfather as disciplinarian (Mann, 2007):

I consciously chose to be different, not to be too busy or the one who lay down rules . . . That’s what I was like when my children were young, always telling them off. I was always, always the bad guy, and they hated me for it . . . Obviously if the grandchildren do something silly, or outright dangerous, I’d say something. But I don’t want to be this Victorian monster. I want them to like me and want to spend time with me. (Jacob)

Jacob’s comment illustrates the emotion work participants undertook to act on themselves as a form of suppression (Hochschild, 1979), consciously choosing to be better grandfathers than fathers. This necessitated actively listening to grandchildren, offering advice and boosting their confidence and mood to instil feelings initially absent (Hochschild, 1979):

It would be easy to fall back into old habits and be that hands-off, distant dad. I want a better connection with my grandchildren . . . I pick them up when they’re down, make them laugh, get them to put things into perspective if they’ve fallen out with someone, or failed an exam. Just try and make them feel better about themselves, talking, it brings us together and we can talk through how we’re feeling. (Malcom)

Malcom’s emotionally expressive grandfather role is antithetical to traditional understandings of masculinity (Connell, 1987). Such emotion work was, however, undertaken

through the enduring position of grandfathers as 'sage'. Nonetheless, shifts between life course stages and generations were noted, recognising moves towards more emotionally invested, 'new' grandfatherhood (Mann and Leeson, 2010) among our sample of UK grandfathers.

Grandfathering on His Terms

A longstanding edict has been identified among grandparents: they should not interfere in the parenting of children (Mason et al., 2007). While participants overwhelmingly enjoyed performing grandchild care, they often did so on their own terms, restricting the time they cared for their grandchildren ('I love spending time with them, but part of that's knowing that I can give them back'). Parental rules and decisions (e.g. limiting sweets and screen-time) were often ignored by participants, as Martin explained:

Their parents have come to realise that what happens when I'm in charge is different to their way of doing things. After school, it's often easier to let them have some iPad time every now and then, which their parents hate, and I can be getting on with something else in the background, like reading the paper. I know their mum and dad want them to be a bit more stimulated. But when they're with me, it's my rules or nothing . . . I'm saving them a fortune in after school fees.

Although the men desired to be more involved (compared with their father role), they seemed less concerned about specific aspects of intensive parenting and the constant stimulation of the developing child. Given high childcare costs, Martin recognised his privileged position in setting the parameters of his grandfather engagement ('it's my rules or nothing') and illustrated how participants often provided everyday care in ways convenient for them/their routine. In particular, the use of technology in loco (grand) parentis afforded participants a degree of leisure time, somewhat countering the all-encompassing norms surrounding intensive parenting (Hays, 1996). Interestingly, Martin's quote illustrates how he (like most participants) positioned himself (in a highly gendered way) as the director of grandchild care, despite often co-grandparenting alongside his wife.

Most participants displayed relaxed views towards facilitating access to age-inappropriate films or computer games (e.g. Fortnite),¹ which parents attempted to shield younger children from, garnering intergenerational tension. Jack explained:

I didn't know anything about Fortnite . . . They brought their [Nintendo] Switch over when I was looking after them one day. They'd sit for hours screaming away at their friends, playing online. It was nice to hear them play, to be boisterous, just like children should, and I'll admit it bought me a bit of time . . . I didn't realise that they'd been banned from playing it. But it kept them entertained . . . when their parents found out, they hit the roof. They don't like the fighting, the guns. I don't have a huge problem with it, it was cowboys and Indians when I was young, bows and arrows, so I left them to it.

Within our research encounters, grandfathers like Jack were willing to bend parental authority during solo-grandparenting time, often explicitly ('I tell their parents: tough! Like

it or lump it') but sometimes covertly ('it's our little secret'). They justified this based on what they thought was best for their grandchild ('all of their friends play it, so I don't want them to be the odd one out, or made fun of, because they're not allowed to play'), aiding their position as 'favourite' grandparent, alongside easing their childcare burden.

The covert nature of their action was further explained by Richard, who discussed his wife's concerns that grandchild access could become restricted, if his grandfather style were revealed: 'my wife was worried that they'd stop us from having the children, because of what I let them get away with. I'll let them do certain things their parents won't, but we've learnt to keep that quiet'. Whereas grandmothers are found to comply with parental wishes to maintain grandchild contact (Harman et al., 2022; Mason et al., 2007), and appear more susceptible to gendered and intensive parenting norms (Timonen, 2020), in our study, the men appeared to challenge the sense that parents always knew best (Hays, 1996; Lee et al., 2014).

While each participant recognised a duty of care to protect their grandchildren from physical harm, they often directed criticism to elements of intensive parenting practices that shield children from risk (Harman et al., 2022; Marx and Steeves, 2010). Paul, for example, highlighted how his own children had agency to spend time away from home unsupervised (often for extended periods). Paul explained how such experiences helped develop his children's resilience through exposure to a degree of (seemingly managed) risk:

Don't get me started about modern parenting. It's about wrapping them up in cotton wool, isn't it? All this stuff they brought over in the early days, the car seats, the buggy, the boot load of junk. We just didn't need it in my day . . . My children could just go to the park on their own in the school holidays. They'd go out early morning, come back, have something to eat, then be out again. We trusted them to stay together, to be back by a certain time . . . Children just don't have that sense of adventure or independence now, which I think is a great shame.

Paul acknowledged the potential shortcomings of intensive parenting, which was sometimes positioned by participants as stifling child agency and development. This reflects recent critiques of intensive parenting, linked to the maladaptive behaviours of children in early adulthood (Kwon et al., 2016).

Other grandfathers reported further violation of parental rules. Winston, for example, found the infant car seat particularly difficult to install when his grandchildren were little. Rather than admit his difficulties in using the car seat correctly (as stringently directed by parents, concerned for their child's safety), Winston instead took short car journeys without it:

When my children were small, things like car seats weren't such a big deal, and they made it to adult life relatively unscathed. Now there's a rule for this and a rule for that, a weight they've got to be for this car seat, another one for that. I find it all very complicated, I can't keep up. And fitting the thing in the car, moving seats in and out, it's a job itself, not that I'd admit that to them [parents] . . . Sometimes, I do take them out to places, just short trips . . . without the car seat.

Winston's example was emblematic of the men we spoke with: grandfathers felt they knew best and were comfortable in exposing their grandchildren to an element of

managed risk (i.e. the car journey was short, neutralising need for safety equipment). Winston recognised how his female partner strongly abided by safety instructions, which were laxer in his solo-grandfathering. Highlighting a lack of competence regarding childcare equipment, like the car seat, risked jeopardising participants' display of ability to others. Parents have reported concerns surrounding the competency of grandfathers based in the UK (Buchanan and Rotkirch, 2018), with participants drawing on previous life course subjectivities and earlier fatherhood experiences to justify what they determined to be 'appropriate' grandfather care, despite acknowledging their absence from their own children's upbringing (with Clive and George obvious exceptions).

Restrictive and Intermittent Intensive Grandfatherhood

Although participants enjoyed time with grandchildren, this often clashed with their leisure and time with partners. The men closely surveilled the caregiving activities they performed ('there's more to my life than my grandparenting') while also monitoring their spouse's involvement. Richard illustrates:

I adore my grandchildren, and I think some of that enjoyment is because we can give them back. I love being a granddad, a Pops, but this is my retirement time. I want time to be able to do the things that I've put off, like travelling, or the things I didn't have time for when I was working . . . my wife is much softer, she usually wants to help more. But this is time we should be spending together. It's usually me who puts a limit on things, and says no, we can't do that. We might want to do something together, to go away somewhere or have trips on our own, without having to be around for pick-ups and drop-offs.

Richard's quote highlights how several participants attempted to regulate the amount of grandparental time devoted to grandchildren. Although participants wanted to be favoured by their grandchildren, they placed boundaries on the amount of childcare they (and their partner) offered, again illustrating our sample's class-based privilege. Unlike their working-class counterparts, who may provide extensive unpaid childcare out of necessity to facilitate their adult children's employment (Ojala and Pietilä, 2020), our higher socio-economic grandfathers protected their leisure time, mirroring McGarrigle et al.'s (2018) study of Irish grandparents. Timetabled childcare commitments were problematic and intruded their (and their partner's) leisure time. Given their 'hands-on' early parenting experiences, Clive and George were again exceptions. Through personally experiencing the tiring nature of childcare as involved fathers, they were more sympathetic to alleviating childcare burdens, but even they monitored the time they were 'on call', as George put it.

Participants were particularly keen to involve themselves in activities that would provide later benefit to their grandchildren, principally those surrounding academic and sporting achievement. Commensurate with intensive parenting discourse (Shirani et al., 2012), grandfathers – in a seemingly different manner to grandmothers (Harman et al., 2022) – directed energies to the advancement of the child. However, they absented themselves from the ordinary, everyday elements of academic life ('I don't do the banal weekly spelling tests'), choosing, instead, to help children with larger or more substantial

elements of homework (e.g. end of term projects or ‘significant’ pieces of summative assessment). Whereas participants wanted to help their grandchildren ‘get on’ in school (and, therefore, later life), they recognised that their efforts were intermittent, as Malcom comments:

There are certain things that I won’t get involved in. The little things, like weekly spelling tests, everyday homework, I don’t do that . . . I helped Emily create a biodome one year for homework, a mock-up of the Amazon ecosystem. We spent days on it. I was happy to do that because it was a bit more important.

In contrast to grandmothers, who tend to ‘step back’ from the competitive side of education (Harman et al., 2022: 48), our participants embraced this future-oriented aspect of intensive parenting culture, which emphasises educational development and success:

I always try to push them that bit further with their big homework, just to challenge them to reach those higher grades. They’ve got to do well so that they can get on, it’s a tough world out there. They need to be pushed down the right path. (Kevin)

After Kevin (a retired teacher) learnt that one of his granddaughters was placed in a lower set at secondary school, he offered her one-to-one teaching sessions during evenings and weekends. As a busy working parent, Kevin commented that he did not offer such tutoring to his own children when they were at school. He also spoke of ‘gently’, but repeatedly, encouraging his daughter to speak to the relevant schoolteacher, and advised her how best to approach moving the child to the top ability group at the earliest opportunity: ‘I just want the best for my grandchildren, so ideally, they’d be in top sets for everything. Set two is ok, but set one is what’s needed. They won’t go far in set two.’ Kevin’s actions clashed with the grandparental norm of non-interference, which grandmothers were reportedly less likely to breach.

Socialising grandchildren into fields in which they were knowledgeable and expert garnered confidence among our participants. Although they largely assumed a less prominent role in early grandfatherhood, as grandchildren aged, participants felt able to orientate solo-grandfathering time towards their own interests and pursuits. For Henry, watching rugby matches with his grandchildren (both male and female) provided opportunity to impart knowledge of the game and to recall his former sporting accomplishments. This sparked wonder and admiration from his grandson in particular:

I’d tell him about my time playing rugby, or the times I’d broken my jaw, but that I played on, not to let the side down. He’d ask me questions, ‘who’s that player, Gramps?’, ‘how good is he, Gramps?’ and he’d look at me as if I knew it all.

Henry’s competence in purposefully enrolling his grandchildren into this highly masculine field enabled him to display knowledge, signalling his elevated position and superiority, while bonding with his grandchildren.

In recounting these tales, Henry imparted knowledge beyond rugby to teach his grandchildren important 'life lessons'. Like other participants, Henry sought to transmit competitive spirit among his grandchildren: 'losing isn't really an option. Don't get me wrong, you've got to be a good sportsman, but be honest, we all know you've failed if you haven't won. I tell them that, tactfully.' By promoting the suppression of weakness and pain to ensure success at all costs (e.g. Henry continued to play rugby despite a broken jaw, to avoid letting the side down), grandfathers, like Henry, displayed traditional masculine values to develop the competitive advantage of their grandchildren.

Discussion

We have shown how our UK grandfathers occupied a prominent role in their grandchildren's lives. This involved grandfather role, while moving away from earlier breadwinner fatherhood, was, however, informed by enduring hegemonic masculine values. Although breadwinning ideology is weakening between generations, it is not disappearing (Brannen and Nilsen, 2006; Dermott, 2014), and continues to inform how many men 'do' fatherhood regardless of their generational cohort (Hodkinson and Brooks, 2023). Although elements of intensive parenting are identified in accounts of grandfathering outside the UK (see Hossain et al., 2018; Lo and Lindsay, 2022), our study addresses an important gap in grandparenthood literature (Timonen, 2020) by showing how UK grandfathers perform what we call *intermittent intensive grandparenting*.

Our findings reveal a changed orientation to parenting, triggered by the transition to grandfatherhood. As grandfathers, breadwinning was reflexively downplayed, and participants recognised the importance of spending time with grandchildren (in ways they could not/did not as working fathers). The men embraced the gendered activities of sports, outdoor pursuits and the competitive nature of educational achievement and advancement when caring for their grandchildren. Whereas UK grandmothers are found to disengage themselves from the competitive side of intensive parenting (Harman et al., 2022), our participants thrived on this aspect of intensive (grand)parenting.

Participants also embraced exposing grandchildren to a degree of (albeit managed) risk through, for example, allowing them to play age-inappropriate games; unhealthy foodwork; freedom to play out, unsupervised; and exposure to the realities of masculine sports/fandom experiences. Grandmothers are arguably more conscious of shielding children from risk and adhere to parental instruction more strongly (Harman et al., 2022). Our UK grandfathers, however, parented 'on their own terms', aware that parents may struggle to find alternative childcare. The men acted as arbiters of grandparental care and patrolled the time that they and their partner devoted to caring. Grandfatherhood was organised around leisure time (Mann et al., 2016), countering the self-sacrifice displayed by grandmothers (Harman et al., 2022) and mothers via child-focused intensive parenting (Hays, 1996).

While grandmothers comply with the edict of non-interfering (Harman et al., 2022; May et al., 2012), our respondents were more willing to challenge and contest parental and expert instruction (e.g. 'turning a blind eye' to the use of safety equipment). Such behaviour could be read as the opposite of child-centric, with the free use of technology and television used in loco-(grand)parentis to alleviate grandfathers' childcare burden.

Yet time with grandfathers did not stifle child agency and afforded grandchildren opportunities shielded by parents. Whereas our reading of Harman et al.'s (2022) study of grandmothering suggests that grandmothers characteristically employ a heightened, over-protective style of (grand)parenting, the grandfathers in our study were the opposite. We find this particularly interesting, given that most participants lacked (earlier) parenting experiences, but approached grandfatherhood as if they 'knew best', evidencing broader masculine values.

We suggest that participants' seemingly over-confident grandparenting approach is informed by enduring traditional masculine values (Mann et al., 2016). Participants often transgressed parental authority to secure their favoured position, in competition with other grandparents. By positioning themselves as 'expert', they imparted 'wisdom' and life lessons to children, in highly masculine ways. They often suppressed their lack of competency in (grand)parenting and were reluctant to seek help (e.g. how to fit/use infant safety equipment properly) for fear of diminishing their status as competent, ageing men. The suppression of weakness and incompetence underpins traditional (hegemonic) masculinity (Connell, 1987), with older men often drawing on traditional masculinities as a blueprint for 'being a man' (Thompson and Langenddoerfer, 2016). Similarly, while wanting to spend 'quality time' with their grandchildren, in a move towards a more emotionally expressive grandfather role (Mann and Leeson, 2010), they enrolled children into fields they were interested in and expert (e.g. sport). This allowed further display of their elevated status in comfortable and familiar masculine fields.

Returning to intensive parenting discourse (Hays, 1996), the notion of the selfless, self-sacrificing grandfather, who makes himself continually available to his grandchildren, and who fully follows the remit of intensive parenting, emerges as somewhat of an optimistic ideal among our UK sample. While participants took strides to embrace elements of intensive grandfatherhood, the men recognised that their grandfathering role was not all encompassing. Indeed, they deliberately monitored the extent of childcare they/their partner provided and positioned themselves as gatekeepers and directors of grandparental childcare.

Although elements of intensive parenting that were linked to traditional masculine values (e.g. power, domination, competition, advancement) were followed, others were not (absenting themselves from self-sacrifice; mundane, everyday caregiving). Accordingly, we render the caregiving stories captured in this article *intermittent intensive grandparenting*, highlighting how participants chose to follow elements of intensive parenting that more easily fit traditional masculine blueprints, while ignoring others. Just as fathers have been found to be somewhat insulated from the demands of intensive parenting ideology (Shirani et al., 2012), our UK grandfathers did not feel the need to fully adhere to this all-encompassing parenting style.

Further research is needed to explore gendered differences within grandparenting and whether grandmothers practise *intermittent intensive grandparenting*. Existing literature acknowledges how grandmothers are found to closely follow parental instruction; do not interfere in parenting; and, we suggest, appear to be over-protective through largely 'facilitating intensive care for children' (Harman et al., 2022: 52). We therefore argue that there is likely greater consistency in grandmothers' performances than the discontinuous, masculine accounts reported here. Similarly, grandmothers evidence much

self-sacrifice (Harman et al., 2022) in a way that our grandfathers largely did not (e.g. they parented on their terms/in ways that accommodated leisure). However, we recognise the middle-class nature of our sample. Given their educational and financial privilege (and that of their offspring), our participants likely had greater freedom to exclude themselves from certain elements of their grandchildren's care, with lower socio-economic grandparents often enrolled in prolonged, regular childcare given economic necessity. This may shed further light on the potentially class-based nature of intermittent intensive grandparenting.

We recognise further limitations to our study. We recognise how our research is situated within a particular context (white, middle-class, biological grandfathering) in the United Kingdom, and that grandfathers beyond this setting are suggested to play involved roles with their grandchildren (Hossain et al., 2018; Lo and Lindsay, 2022). Future research is needed that explores cross-cultural comparisons of grandfathering, highlighting differences in approach between cultural groups. We also deliberately recruited men who had experiences of grandparenting on their own (e.g. as female partners continued to work or pursued their own leisure time), which is likely not the case for all grandfathers. Future research should explore different spectrums of grandfather care, including the experiences of men who grandparent as divorced, single grandfathers (or those only trusted to grandparent alongside their partner). We also draw on biological grandfathers, and future studies may benefit from recruiting step-grandfathers.


Our recruitment approach restricted the men who could have opted-in or were judged as having the competency to talk with us as researchers (e.g. very old, or men suffering from ill-health, may not have been recommended for participation). The snowball referral approach likely informed the homogenous nature of our sample. Future research would benefit from recruiting diversity within grandfather groups, recognising that grandparenting experiences are not uniform, and are shaped by categories such as social class, geographical proximity, lineage and culture. Yet our study sheds important light on how norms of masculinity persist into old age, which enabled white, middle-class grandfathers from the United Kingdom to embrace elements of involved and intensive grandfatherhood (e.g. emotional connectedness), while challenging several other aspects, to grandfather 'on his terms'.


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ORCID iDs

Ben Kerrane  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2114-5965>

Katy Kerrane  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8447-5673>

Shona Bettany  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9141-1005>

Note

1. Fortnite is a free-to-play online battle game, where players land on an island in a dystopian future and must fight for better equipment and weapons to become the last person standing. It has a UK age rating of 12-years+.

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Ben Kerrane is Professor of Marketing at Manchester Metropolitan University Business School. His research interests include family consumption, fatherhood, childhood, gender relations and consumer socialisation. He has presented his research to a range of audiences and has published in *Sociology*, *Gender, Work and Organization*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Studies in Higher Education*, *Journal of Marketing Management* and *Advances in Consumer Research*.

Katy Kerrane is Lecturer in Marketing at University of Liverpool Management School. Her research interests revolve around ethnicity and consumption. Her doctoral research explored the transition to motherhood drawing on a sample of second-generation British Indian women. She has presented her research to a range of academic audiences (e.g. British Sociological Association, European Advances in Consumer Research) and has published in *Sociology*, *Gender, Work and Organization* and *European Journal of Marketing*.

Shona M Bettany is Professor of Marketing at Huddersfield Business School, University of Huddersfield. She is a consumer ethnographer focusing on consumer culture in all its guises but specifically on consumer trends and critical approaches to marketing and consumer research, with a particular interest in feminist criticality. She has presented her research to the US and European meetings of the Association for Consumer Research and has published in *Advances in Consumer Research*, *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, *Marketing Theory*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Marketing Management* and the *European Journal of Marketing*.

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