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## **Grandfatherhood: Shifting Masculinities in Later Life**

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### **Abstract**

Drawing on qualitative interview data, this article examines how grandfatherhood relates to the assertion and transformation of masculinities in later life. Recent attention to ageing and masculinities has identified how older men are challenged to successfully maintain connections to hegemonic masculinity in light of altered family and life circumstances. We consider men's engagement with grandfatherhood as a means for so doing, illustrating how men make sense of the role through continuity with hegemonic masculinity. While grandfathers describe emotionally intimate and affectionate relationships with their grandchildren, their accounts reflect desires to re-affirm previous connections to masculinities. Attention to the way individualised masculinities are re-negotiated in later life can help to explain how men are making sense of the new family opportunities that arise from being a grandparent. Such an analysis of grandfatherhood, we argue, also offers significant critique of hegemonic masculinity and its distinction to non-hegemonic masculinities intersected by old age.

### **Keywords**

Grandfathers; Hegemonic Masculinity; Masculinities; Emotional Intimacy; Ageing;

## **Introduction**

This article addresses how grandfatherhood relates to the assertion and transformation of masculinities in later life – a theory that to date has rarely been applied to studies about grandparents. Introduced by Connell (1987) the idea of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ represents one of the most influential concepts for theorizing how gender differences and hierarchies are maintained (Budgeon 2013). Hegemonic masculinity refers to dominant forms of masculinity (such as physical toughness) but which is maintained through its opposition to, and marginalisation of, alternative masculinities, the latter representing a ‘repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity’ (Connell 1995: 78). However recent theorising and empirical research have questioned the usefulness of hegemonic masculinity for capturing multiple masculinities across time and space, particularly in relation to ageing. Theoretically, Hearn (2011: 95) points out that ‘[h]egemonic masculinity has limits as a framework for taking on board all the complexities of ageing (men). The complex picture, with men being both given status through ageing and old age but at the same time marginalized, is difficult to encompass or conceptualise within the frame of hegemonic masculinity’.

We argue that the analysis of grandfatherhood can contribute to, and would benefit from, the theorising of how masculinities and gender identities related to doing family and caring shift in later life. Drawing on qualitative interview data, we consider men’s engagement with grandfatherhood as a means for maintaining connections with hegemonic masculinity in later life. Providing a case-by-case analysis of five individual

grandfathers selected from a larger corpus of interviews, we examine individual accounts of becoming and being a grandfather but in the context of different family circumstances. Our analysis illustrates how, in each case, doing grandfatherhood is made sense of through asserting continuity with traditional masculinity. While grandfathers describe intimate and affectionate relationships with their grandchildren, their accounts of their involvement reflect desires to re-affirm previous connections to masculinity, for example, by acting as father-like figures, or by developing relationships with grandchildren via sport, or advising on school and career. Equally, grandfatherhood may conflict with continuing interests in leisure and paid employment which are other means by which men may reaffirm previous connections with hegemonic masculinity. Attention to the way individualised masculinities are re-negotiated in later life can therefore help explain how men are making sense of the new family opportunities that arise from being a grandparent. Such an analysis of grandfatherhood, we argue, also offers significant critique of hegemonic masculinity as a conceptual framework for understanding how longstanding and transitional masculinities associated with caring and family co-exist in later life.

### **Making Sense of Grandfatherhood**

It is difficult to make an assessment about grandfatherhood from previous scholarship (see Bates, 2009; Author A; for critical reviews) precisely because there are so few specific studies of grandfathers (both Cunningham-Burley, 1984 and Kivett, 1991 were pioneering in this regard). Much of our existing understanding has been derived through comparing and contrasting grandfathers with grandmothers within studies of ‘grandparents’ (Dench and Ogg, 2002). Accordingly, grandmothers have been viewed

as having ‘warmer’, more involved, relationships with their grandchildren (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986; Roberto and Stroes, 1992). In contrast, grandfathers have been associated with more authoritarian and distant styles, for example: in overseeing the development of grandchildren or providing a ‘reservoir’ of knowledge and wisdom (Neugarten and Weinstein, 1964). Grandmothers, in particular, have been regarded as ‘kin keepers’ (Hagestad, 1985). One reason for this is the acknowledged ‘matrilineal advantage’ in which grandmothers and adult daughters act as mediators of grandparent-grandchild relationships (Chan and Elder, 2000). These assumptions about grandfathers as deficient to grandmothers, as well as the treatment of grandparents as an entity, have arguably shied researchers from considering grandfathers as a separate topic.

More recently we can point to a growth of qualitative research studies, which give separate, or at least equal, attention to grandfathers (Author C; Roberto et al., 2001, Author D, Author F; Waldrop et al., 1999). These studies highlight many previously unstated aspects of grandfatherhood, such as the salience of emotionality and caring in men’s understandings of being a grandfather (Author C); their role in nurturing and mentoring grandchildren (Roberto, Allen and Bleiszner, 2001; Waldrop et al., 1999); as well as their engagement with grandchildren in outdoor activities (Author D; Author F). In addition to the grandparent literature, there is a case for bringing grandfathers firmly within the sociological analysis of men’s family practices within Britain. There have been extensive analyses of the family lives and intergenerational relationships of older people (Brannen, Moss and Mooney, 2004; Chambers et al., 2009; Phillipson et al., 2002), but little direct attention to grandfathers within these. The lack of attention to grandfathers can also be contrasted to the scholarship on fathers and fatherhood, which represents a significant growth area in the sociology of families over the last two

or more decades. Morgan (2004) has taken issue with the sole focus upon fathers, pointing out that the parent-child dimension is but one of the many relationships that underlie transitions from boyhood through to advanced old age. He argues that ‘the location of men in families and households is more than a question of the analysis of fatherhood...it involves a variety of other family-based identities’ which ‘vary over the life course’ (2004: 390). However the need for a particular focus on grandfathers is not only because men’s family practices and roles can vary. It is also because both men’s *and* women’s roles are gendered; and that men’s family practices are, themselves, structured in relation to masculinities, ageing and generation. A particular contribution, then, would be to explore how continuities and changes in gender and masculinities identified within the literature on ageing inform the practices of contemporary grandfathers.

### **Shifting Masculinities in Later Life**

The literature on gender and ageing points to both continuities and discontinuities in how masculinities, tied to domestic, family and caring roles, are constructed in later life (Arber et al., 2003; Ribeiro et al., 2007; Van den Hoonaard, 2007). Arber et al. (2003) have argued that later life is characterised by a blurring of gender roles and identities with older men carrying out caring and domestic duties which, when in paid employment, would have previously been carried out by their wives. Retirement, in particular, they argue, necessitates a realignment of ‘the traditional discourse of masculinity...to accommodate the changing roles and relationships created by altered life circumstances (2003: 5). The transition to retirement and the shift from ‘centre stage’ generates a gap between the idea and the reality of hegemonic masculinity. Similarly,

as Reich (2007) states, ‘...issues of masculinity and masculine competence in both public and private life arise as men age and lose access to traditional places in the family’ (2007: 292).

How such a ‘realignment’ of masculinities in later life relates to grandfatherhood, however, is not clear. The dominant image of the grandparent remains one that is synonymous with old age and grandmotherhood (Attias-Donfut and Segalen, 2002: 281), and, therefore, potentially at odds with dominant or hegemonic styles of masculinity. Accordingly, it can be argued that old men, as grandfathers, express a different form of masculinity through relations with grandchildren, such as those based on caring, nurturing and emotional intimacy. Waldrop et al. (1999) argue that grandfathers depart from traditional male roles and express ‘an alternative discourse of masculinity’ based on strong desires to be emotionally involved with their grandchildren. Sorenson and Cooper (2010: 117) also conclude that grandfathering ‘offers the potential to counter the notion of hegemonic masculinity’ which defines the experience of fatherhood. More broadly, Thompson et al. (1990) state that ‘as men get older, the tough image of masculinity softens’ and ‘with this may come an opportunity to be more emotionally expressive and affectionate’ (1990: 190-1). Yet, as we demonstrate, being a grandparent also provides men with capital – to be fit and active; to be needed and significant family figures – which whilst challenging traditional stereotypes of grandfathers as distant and authoritarian figures, also serve to reconcile hegemonic masculinity in later life, particularly after retirement.

## **Data and Analysis**

We draw on qualitative interviews conducted with grandfathers to provide an insight into how men's previous connections to masculinity become re-affirmed through grandfathering. To achieve this, we adopt a case-by-case analysis of a sub-sample of five individual grandfathers – Alan, Brian, Will, Chris and Stuart - all of whom were selected from a larger funded study into grandfatherhood involving two of the authors<sup>1</sup>. This approach allows us to explore in greater detail how masculinities permeate individual accounts, albeit within particular family and social contexts. Moreover, the case method allows us to 'make visible' the context of other discourses that re-affirm traditional masculinity, such as discourses of fatherhood, paid employment or engagement in leisure or outdoor activities. The approach thus reflects our theoretical emphasis on *individualised* masculinities, but in the context of broader family and life circumstances.

As stated, we draw on data collected for a funded study into contemporary grandfatherhood in Britain. This included 60 qualitative interviews with grandfathers<sup>2</sup>. The majority of the grandfathers (46) were contacted through the parents of children attending two secondary schools located within the same city in the south of England. Initially, contact was made with parents via an address list of students attending the schools. Parents then provided us with contact details for grandfathers who consented to take part in an interview. A further 14 were subsequently recruited through other methods including advertisements placed in community centres, grandparent newsletters and through personal contacts. All interviews took place at the grandfathers' homes, apart from six interviews at parent's homes, two at places of work, and a further two via telephone.

This generated a heterogeneous sample: The age of the participants ranged between 48 and 94 at time of interview. Most had several grandchildren (three or more). Some had grandchildren who were now in their 20s, whilst others had only recently become grandfathers for the first time. There was an even split between maternal and paternal grandfathers. The vast majority (52) had retired, although some continued to undertake paid work in a part time capacity. 49 were married or cohabiting, eight of whom had divorced, re-married or re-partnered. In around one-third of the cases, the grandfathers' children had divorced or separated, with five grandfathers having step-grandchildren. Although families were geographically dispersed, two-thirds of grandfathers lived within 30 miles of at least one grandchild. Only one grandfather was from a minority ethnic background. Since most of the grandfathers were recruited via parents, this may of course have biased our sample away from cases where family relations were conflicted. Parents may have also considered their fathers unsuitable for interview if they were suffering from ill-health, disability or if they were believed to be 'too old'. This may explain the very few cases (three) of those grandfathers suffering from ill-health or disability in the sample.

Upon completion, all interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo. As an inductive procedure this was aimed at identifying and organising recurrent themes across the whole data set, including themes to do with the ways grandfathers understand their role, practices and activities with grandchildren, the emotions and feelings they attach to relationships, as well as themes to do with family circumstances, employment and geographic proximity. For the purpose of this article, however, we focus on five cases that we believe each exemplify strong networks and close emotional bonds with their grandchildren<sup>3</sup>. The five cases also reflect different family and socio-economic

circumstances. For instance, Alan and Brian both have grandchildren whose parents are separated or divorced, whilst Will, Chris and Shaun have themselves re-partnered following divorce. Alan, Will and Shaun are retired. Chris is in full time employment, and Shaun is also retired but emphasises leisure pursuits. Nevertheless, these cases have been selected precisely because men and emotional intimacy ‘have traditionally been understood as a problematic combination, with men often dismissed as “emotionally illiterate” and instrumental’ (Whitehead and Barrett 2001: 220). According to Kerfoot (2001) ‘emotional intimacy’ is non-instrumental and is coveted for its own sake rather than to promote some other organizational goal. It involves authenticity, genuineness and the ‘letting go’ of predictable scripts. Like Messner (2001), we take our cases to illustrate how emotional literacy, or the genuine and authentic discourses of love and emotional closeness used to describe interactions with grandchildren, can be enacted so as to re-affirm hegemonic masculinity, but using a softer discourse.

In what follows, we present our analysis of these five cases. Taking each case in turn, we highlight recurring instances in which emotional intimacy – the describing of close and affectionate bonds with grandchildren – intersects with other contexts and discourses within individual accounts which re-affirm masculinity – including fathering, paid employment, leisure interests and activities. In doing so, we also reflect upon how different displays of masculinity relate to both the distinctive and shared features of their family and life circumstances. Each case raises its own complex issues to with family circumstances and we discuss these at greater length in the concluding discussion.

## **1. Alan**

Alan is 71 years old and has three grandchildren: a 12 year old granddaughter from his older daughter; and a ten year old granddaughter and eight year old grandson from his son. In understanding Alan's case, it is significant that his daughter was a single parent for some time before re-partnering. Alan describes at length the 'very close' relationship he has had with his oldest granddaughter since she was three years old, and which he puts down to having been a father figure. He reflects on his feelings on becoming a grandfather in the following way:

I will be perfectly honest with some trepidation and some misgivings. I've always been a very conventional person and there was a daughter just about to have a baby, not married, you know, just at that time had a partner, which didn't last very long, which is when we had to step in. So there was a certain amount of 'oh my goodness' and it wasn't the norm from my experience. So there was a little apprehension I suppose. But very soon she was a young one, she was the apple of my eye. We have spent an awful lot of time with her doing things. I spend more time with her than I did with my own children because I have the time. I was retired.

Alan expresses ambivalence (Mason et al., 2007) about the circumstances in which he became a grandfather. The context in which he became a grandfather conflicts with his 'conventional' understanding of family. In acting as a 'substitute father', Alan has developed an intimate relationship with his eldest granddaughter, one that is certainly not as peripheral as previous evidence indicates (Author A). For sure, he maintains a role in 'overseeing' his granddaughter, for example, in ensuring she maintains good school grades. His relationship does focus on 'masculine' activities such as sport and teaching mathematics and there is a desire to instil the 'right sense of family'. He also describes mutual interests in activities such as sport whilst disregarding his granddaughter's interests around music and theatre, which have little appeal to him.

Interestingly he emphasises sports so that his conception of care is highly masculine, even with a female grandchild:

I did spend an awful lot of time with her. I mean I taught her to ride a bicycle. I took her on bicycle rides, encouraging her in her sporting athletics and even started her playing golf for a while. I am very much 'hands on' or as much as I am allowed to be. As she is getting older and grown more independent I have had to stand back and make myself stand back a bit. I can't do the things that I used to do. I sort of see myself as a surrogate father and it's not easy to start retracting from that situation. But I realise I have to because it's the way of things; it's the normal way.

In these extracts, Alan talks of the need to 'stand back' which is 'the normal way' and of 'jealousy' regarding the time his granddaughter spends with the biological father. What is of significance however is how he describes himself as a 'surrogate father'. Grandfathering, it can be argued, is not as clearly recognised as a masculine role compared to being a father (see Lupton and Barclay, 1997 on fathering as masculinity). Yet he tries to reclaim this form of hegemonic masculinity by describing himself as a surrogate father – which is about being needed, as well as being a provider. In doing so he demonstrates the difficulties and tensions that the grandfather role, as a non-hegemonic role, raises for maintaining continuity with traditional masculinity in later life. Nevertheless, this discursive adherence to hegemonic masculinity is softened through his desire to maintain emotional involvement:

It has given me great satisfaction. I think I have learnt to appreciate my family more with the grandchildren than I ever did with my own. Although I love them dearly I just didn't get the involvement with them because of work. I did spend long hours working. Yeah it's made me look and appreciate family more is the short answer.

This relationship with his older granddaughter is also different to the relationship he describes with his other grandchildren. With his other grandchildren, Alan has not felt the need to 'step in'. He does not see them so often: 'They're busy with school activities...they come along give you a hug and they're off again. But it's nice to see them'. Yet it is by acting the way he does, as a surrogate father, that he maintains a connection to traditional masculinity. The relationship he describes with his other grandchildren is more distant and the time he spends with them more limited due to their involvement in other school and social activities. Alan thus has a particular connection with his granddaughter, which results from the felt need to 'step in'.

## **2. Brian**

Brian, aged 64, describes intense involvement with his ten-year-old grandson. Like Alan, this also emerges in the context of an absent father, Brian's biological son, whom the grandson has never met. Concerned with their grandson's welfare, Brian and his wife moved closer to him, not long after his birth. Since he was four, the grandson has been living with his grandparents. Thus at the time of interview Brian and his wife were the main carers. Brian describes an acute sense of being a 'substitute father':

I suppose because dad's not there I've got to be more far more involved than say, um, a normal granddad would be. I mean the granddad bits are on a daily basis. I wouldn't say 24-7 but it's mostly that intense. My wife, he talks to her. But unfortunately now I'm the hero. And he even tells his mates at school, oh if that's broken, 'oh grumpy will fix that'. I play football, I play swing ball. The other thing, of course, is that I've got to be the one that he plays with which is getting a little harder you know. If he wants to play fight or whatever or wrestle it's got to be me so I suppose he keeps you fit.

Brian describes being 'far more involved' as a grandfather than a 'normal' grandfather would be, because 'dad's not there'. While uncomfortable about being considered a hero, his response is to adopt masculine practices and to adhere to a normalised version of grandfather, which is to fix (see also Author F). This particular relationship is contrasted to his other grandchildren whom he sees only a few times a year, and who do not 'need' him. The coinciding of grandfatherhood with retirement has also provided Brian with opportunities for a new involvement in family life, something he embraces:

I think its better. The simple reason is I'm here. When my own two were growing up I was teaching, I was teaching 30 miles away. But by the time I got home in the evening when they are very young, they were either in or just going to bed and I would leave about ten past seven. I also took three night classes a week to try and bolster the money. So this has been far better because I've got more involved. I'm here, I've got more patience and I'm not as tired.

For Brian, grandfatherhood has brought about involvement in family, which was not undertaken when he was a father. In Brian's case, there are acute reasons for treating his grandson differently. Brian describes being highly involved in caring for and looking after his grandson, but also in ways that are masculinised. There is a continual referral back to sport and keeping fit and to building confidence through outdoor and physical activities, which also relates to Brian's previous employment as a secondary school physical education teacher. In the context of an absent father, it is the particular relationship with his grandson that is emphasised, rather than a sense of equal involvement and responsibility to all his grandchildren.

### **3. Will**

Will, aged 68, is divorced and recently re-partnered. He has three children and four grandchildren as well as one step-grandchild from his current partner. His oldest daughter lives some 40 miles away, and is married. His second eldest daughter lives in Switzerland, whilst his son lives a short distance away in the same town. He has spent most of his working life as an art teacher in both secondary and tertiary education. Will rejects the previously identified role of grandparents as distant and authoritarian figures (Neugarten and Weinstein, 1964) highlighting awareness of the contemporary socio-cultural context and revealing how men's practices of family are negotiated in response to this and reflection on being grandparented. These are roles, which he associates with his own grandparents and with a different era:

I mean my grandparents never took us for walks or played with us. They were quite authoritative. I mean I constantly play with my grandchildren and look after them and enjoy their company immensely. Nothing like that ever happened with my grandparents. They are the joy of your life and you can't wait to take them out and spoil them. But I can't remember anything like that with my own grandparents. Also my brother has eight grandchildren. We play constantly with them, go on holiday with them and look after them when mums and dads are either ill or got to go to work.

Will has no initial ambivalence towards becoming a grandfather, but states being 'absolutely delighted, I was thrilled to bits'. It is significant in this account that his children lived with him, rather than with the biological mother, after their divorce, and there are particular undisclosed reasons for this. Consequently, and while he acknowledges the tendency towards matrilineal relations in other families, that have been identified elsewhere (Timonen and Doyle, 2012), Will considers himself to be more involved with his children and grandchildren than his ex-wife, both as father and grandfather:

That is very often the case. But I suppose in my case it is the reverse. I am more involved with the children. I mean I know they spend more time with me than they do with their grandmother. Yeh absolutely without a shadow of a doubt. If there is any sort of question it has always been me ever since because they lived with me.

Will reports how his children would more often turn to him than to their mother as someone to depend on and talk to about family and relationship issues. In respect of his experience of fatherhood, Will's understanding of grandfatherhood and masculine roles is different to the other cases described here. He rejects a traditional view of grandparents as distant and authoritarian. At the same time, through notions of being there, being dependable and noble (see also Miller, 2010: 56-7 on fathers 'being there'), Will continues to rely on a masculinised view of men's family involvement in order to make sense of their grandfather role. Unlike Alan and Brian, his interests are less specified to sport and fitness, and can involve a wider range of activities such as playing imaginary games, gardening, teaching how to draw, sitting and watching children's television programmes. Yet they no less provide avenues for continuity with traditional masculinity. He also describes times when he has 'looked after' his grandchildren, but also how this can be constrained by living further away:

I always make a point of saying, you know, 'I'll look after the kids and you go out if you want to go out to the theatre or something'. I mean two of my children live in different towns. If I were living in the same location then yeh I would be only too happy. When they are older maybe and want to go back to work or something or study when in that situation I can say 'don't worry I'll pick the kids up'.

His sense of being the primary grandparent also relates to having been the primary parent whereby his children had lived with him after his divorce from his wife. This is

less evident in the relationship with his grandson from his biological son, despite them living nearby: 'I see him sort of quite regularly perhaps once a week I might pop into see my son to borrow his lawn mower to do the lawns and I see Jack quite frequently then'. Thus while Will represents a primary figure as a maternal grandfather for his daughters' children, this does not appear to be the case with his grandson as a paternal grandfather. Again, being needed and being a provider appear central to how these men understand the nature of their relationships.

In each of the three cases above, being a grandfather is associated with having more time to spend with grandchildren and family, post-retirement. In our next two cases, we develop our argument further by examining how grandfathering is negotiated alongside other defining roles, of paid employment, new relationships and also leisure.

#### **4. Chris**

Chris is 51 years old. He is in full time employment and is one of the youngest grandfathers to take part in the study. He is a professional, works long hours and retains ambitions in relation to this career. He is also divorced, remarried and has two grandchildren from his daughter and a step-grandson from his second wife's daughter. There are a number of features of his experience that are of note. He epitomises the sense of ambivalence in becoming a grandfather:

When I discovered that my daughter was first pregnant, I think we all struggled with it. Having a child in a situation where I suppose our overall view was that it wasn't very clever to have a child. I mean she is lovely. It is difficult practically to be a grandparent so we are not really ready to be grandparents. I mean pragmatically we both work long hours and it is difficult to really give the amount of time that we

would like. But I don't think it has really affected the bond I've developed particularly with my granddaughter. We see them about once or twice a month and they stay over on weekends so we do spend quality time. There's a lot of affection and warmth but as I said we haven't really had that much time. We can provide the practical provisions nappies and push chairs and you know a fun role but the actual care giving demands can be tricky.

Like Alan above, Chris' sense of ambivalence in becoming a grandfather relates to the circumstances around the birth of the grandchild as well as the impact of motherhood on his daughter's educational and career aspirations. However, his ambivalence also relates to his own long working hours and feeling unable to spend as much time with his grandchildren as he would like. Grandfatherhood has to fit in with paid employment, not the other way round. For sure, Chris draws explicitly on his experience of fathering in terms of care giving, for example, remembering how to change nappies, bathing and preparing food. He also describes contributing to his children and grandchildren financially through purchasing items. He actively manages being a grandfather with other important goals in his life:

I find it difficult to be the grandfather that I want to be and that is purely down to time. Not because I wouldn't have the opportunity I think they would value us having the kids more. But you try and have some time together with your wife as well as time with friends and then there is work and I do a lot of private work on top of that and, you know, there just isn't enough hours in the day. I suppose my hope is that I will go and retire when I'm 60, they will still be young and still stuff we can do together. But I'm a bit pissed off that I can't do more at this point because we don't see them that often and so the expectation is that you do not have the same level of responsibility. That might not be the same for my daughter's mum who is more involved in the care giving side. She will pick them up from nursery because she can you know. I can't because I don't have the time

Being a grandfather has to 'fit in' with what's going on in his life. Chris finds things like waking up in the middle of the night challenging because of his work and so talks about the need to regulate his involvement into short predictable spells so that he can manage it in relation to his career. Chris puts paid employment first and, in doing so, conforms to hegemonic masculinity. Equally, he talks in detail about caring practices such as feeding, bathing, reading bed time stories, as well as trying to build a swing, watching children's television, and playing with children's toys. In addition, Chris describes ways in which grandparenting has become part of his and his wife's everyday life, for example, through decorating their spare bedroom with furniture and toys, through keeping supplies of nappies, purchasing a push chair and fitting child seats to their car. Chris' account illustrates well, the contradictions between care-oriented masculinities and continuity with hegemonic masculinity through work.

## **5. Stuart**

Stuart is 65 years old and lives several hundred miles away from most of his grandchildren. He is divorced from his children's biological mother and has since been remarried over 20 years ago. He has two sons from his first marriage who have no children, and three step-children from his wife's first marriage. Together, Stuart and his wife have seven grandchildren. Because of the geographical distance, they see their grandchildren only a few times a year. Yet he considers himself to be more involved in the lives of his grandchildren than either of the biological grandfathers. This said, the physical distance dictates the nature and extent of contact that they have with their grandchildren:

We see them when they come down here and when we go up there. Just supportive in a sort of secondary sense I have a good relationship with all the grandchildren. I think it is important to have good conversation skills and develop a good rapport with them. They do ring us up. Well they ring Judy up. But there is much more email contact and telephone than face to face because of the distance. They will ring me up about homework, for example. But I have never thought about it as a role or a responsibility. It's just about providing them with some fun.

What makes a good grandfather? Always being available. Joining in what they are doing. Inviting them out. Taking the initiative. Talking to them about their homework. History, I am very interested in history and they have rung me up to ask me questions. I try to get them engaged in discussions about history and things. What do I do in particular? I try to engage them in communication and discussion. The youngsters are pretty shy and find it difficult to discuss and so I try to encourage them in that and try to get them to do things

Because of the distance, Stuart places greater emphasis on email and telephone communication as he does on face-to-face contact. He does not view being a grandfather as a responsibility. Nor is it a role in which he is responding to the needs of his children/grandchildren. Yet when asked to define a 'good grandfather' he emphasises the instrumental aspects of the role such as transferring knowledge and values. He tries to engage them in conversation about history, education, doing outdoor activities with them and providing them with a fun time. Like Chris, but unlike our other cases, Stuart associates grandfatherhood with having less, rather than more, time with family:

You haven't got the time as a grandfather. With your own children it is a full time thing and a full time responsibility. While with grandchildren, it's about giving them a good time. You know you can give them back. It's a limited period and that is quite crucial because when you are with them you always know that it is for a limited period and so that dictates the kind of things you do. It is more activity related.

Maybe it's an age thing but it is a relief to know that they are not yours and they are not your responsibility. I am not sure how I would feel if I was to have my own kids again.

Both Chris and Stuart emphasise interests outside of family. Stuart, in particular, maintains a view of grandfatherhood as quality time and as fun. In emphasising *active* grandparenting, Stuart also distinguishes the way he acts from his grandparents:

My memory of them is being old Doing things gently. Having rests. Acting and doing things as elderly people. It is difficult to describe but they just seemed old.

...as well as from his own parents as grandparents:

Well they would come and baby-sit and do parent things. But they didn't do anything active with them. They did bring them things and buy them things. For example, my father made a scale railway in the garden and liked doing things like that. But it was very much following the mould of their parents. Acting in the same way. They were their role models and just followed on in exactly the same mould as they were. Acting sedately and acting old and didn't relax like we do today. It is different. Both of us, we don't feel any different to what we were in our later 20s. Both of us are quite active and fit acting in that same way talking about and watching films, playing on the computer, going on picnics, playing games and things like that. But that might just be our personalities. I think we are still looking for excitement and stimulation in our lives and not just settling into old age. *We don't want to just be grandparents.*

Through Stuart, as with Chris, we see how being a grandparent competes with being in a new relationship. This is coupled with a positive assessment of greater individual choice based on being active and living life in retirement. This supports findings by Scraton and Holland (2006) who suggest that grandfatherhood and family time continue to be a source of 'work' for men that takes them away from their leisure pursuits. This

can result in a continued gendered division of labour in family life where family is seen as women's domain. While noting some differences between himself and his wife as grandparents, he puts particular stress on doing things in partnership in ways which blurs the distinction between them. Hence the way they do grandparenting together reflects the organisation of their lives and the prioritization of a relatively new relationship within this.

## **Conclusion**

This article has examined how men's connections with hegemonic masculinity in later life are maintained through being a grandfather. Accordingly, and in light of the co-existence and contradictions of both enduring and shifting masculinities in later life, the distinction between hegemonic and alternative masculinities is problematic. On one hand grandfathering provides opportunities for the construction of affectionate and intimate relations with grandchildren. Yet it also serves to privilege men through maintaining and re-affirming their previous connections to traditional masculinity. Thus we argue for a sociology of grandfathers as premised not upon an alternative masculinity – based on emotional closeness – but rather on a *softening* of the discourse and practice of masculinity and which is carried out in a more negotiated and reflexive way. This helps explain why men might play down traditional masculinities, while being no less emotionally literate, in their discursive accounting of grandfatherhood, and also engaged in activities and practices which reflect the individualised ways in which ageing masculinities are performed and negotiated.

Care and emotional intimacy do not in themselves define the shifting nature of grandfatherhood. The cases we describe here, along with others in this study, do exemplify strong emotional bonds with their grandchildren. The cases of Alan and Brian illustrate in detail how becoming a grandfather, coinciding with retirement, had brought about a changed orientation to family. Both describe having the time to engage with grandchildren in ways which were not available to them whilst working long hours as fathers. Chris, one of the youngest grandfathers interviewed, exemplifies how paid employment and career continue to define relationships with grandchildren, and in particular, the ability to provide grandchild care. Yet Chris was no less 'emotionally literate' when talking about his grandchildren. Despite this, there is little evidence that the instrumental role of grandfathers as identified in previous literature has changed. There remain strong interests in the mental and physical development of their grandchildren, and in the transmission of their own sense of masculinity. In some cases it was primarily the grandfathers' *own* interests (for example in sport, history, science, art, gardening and the outdoors) that were pursued and this was often regardless of the gender of the grandchild. Such examples illustrate how grandfathering facilitates the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity through developing relationships via sport and activities.

We find strong desires amongst our cases to challenge, and distance themselves from, what they saw as traditional representations of grandfathers as inactive and passive (for example 'sitting back with pipe in chair', 'acting old'). Rather being 'active', 'hands-on' and 'not old' as one grandfather asserted. These grandfathers also saw themselves as surrogate fathers, more fun and active or indeed more sensitive compared to their contemporaries or to their fathers and grandfathers. Will in particular challenges the

behaviours of his own grandparents as authoritarian figures and is more sensitive to the gender of his grandchildren in terms of the kinds of activities he engages them in. In so doing, previous conceptions of grandfatherhood are negotiated through the assertion of their sense of masculinity as older men. For these men, grandfathering enables them to maintain active and youthful lives. Yet even for fit, healthy and retired men, being a grandfather can conflict with other interests. For Stuart, being a grandfather represents just one dimension of an active life. While enjoying spending time with grandchildren, Stuart does not want to be defined by being a grandfather. Thus while retirement can be associated with greater involvement in family, it also provides new opportunities to pursue goals associated with leisure, travel and relationships.

Motivations for involvement also reflect desires to maintain connections to masculinity through 'being there' and 'being dependable'; 'being noble' and 'heroic'. For reasons described we have argued that grandfathers should be subject to renewed sociological attention in their own right. Yet our analytic approach also highlights the complex family circumstances of individual grandfathers – circumstances which shape their experiences as grandfathers and multiple performances of masculinity, or new masculinities (Author F). In several cases, involvement as grandfathers was intrinsically related to the absence of fathers, whether due to divorce or simply working long hours. Phrases such as 'stepping in' and 'plugging holes' are central to understanding their motivations. In particular, the grandfathers would often evaluate their own experiences through contrasting them with a view of what 'normal grandfathering' should be, as not so involved, but being able to 'give the grandchildren back', only 'stepping in' on occasions. It is clear that grandfathers' involvement with different sets of grandchildren depended upon the family circumstances of their

children. But it also relates to their status as maternal or paternal grandfathers. In three of the five cases, the sense of ‘fixing’ or ‘stepping in’ was with the daughter’s children. Although in Brian’s case, it is with his son’s child that he has the closest relationship. In all five cases, we witness how grandfathers may make sense of different, sometimes challenging, family circumstances through re-affirming themselves as a ‘protective’ figure, but this may be more readily expressed with female family members.

We consider grandfathering as a significant area for furthering understanding of the doing of masculinities within later life but also theoretically, for questioning hegemonic masculinities as a conceptual framework that has failed to address the importance of the intersection of old age and its impact on the performance of non-hegemonic masculinities (Hearn, 2011, Messerschmidt, 2012). An area for future theorising of ageing masculinities then might be to go beyond the normative accounts of grandfathering as fun and enriching, and to account for times in which this positive story of grandfatherhood is challenged by ageing masculinities; such as when bodies are pushed too far, when activity is less achievable or when relationships with grandchildren are physically constrained through ill-health and disability. This would move us beyond a focus on how men adhere to hegemonic masculinity to consideration of the embodied and lived realities of men’s ageing that are shaping their identities and new and alternative performances of masculinities.

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### **Notes**

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<sup>2</sup> For other published findings from this research see Author A, Author B and Author C.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that the whole sample exemplified such strong ties and emotional bonds, or that other understandings of grandfathering were absent. Several participants found it difficult to talk about their role and what they did as grandfathers, and tended to qualify their involvement as insignificant to that of grandmothers. In addition, four grandfathers adopted explicitly authoritarian views toward the behaviour of their grandchildren, whilst two considered their role as grandfather to be meaningless.

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