

# **Grandparental agency after adult children's divorce**



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**‘NEW PERSPECTIVES ON FAMILY CHANGE IN IRELAND’**

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# Why study grandparenting?



- Growing number of older people who are also grandparents (ca. 80% of the 60+)
- Sharing longer life spans with their adult children and grandchildren (due to longevity)
- On average, smaller number of grandchildren; so-called *beanpole family*

These quantitative, demographic changes open up the prospect, in principle, of significant *qualitative* changes in the grandparent-grandchild relationship

# What else has changed?



- Economies and labour markets
- Family forms
- Social norms
- Social policies

= the STRUCTURE

- Grandparents' own ideas, predilections and choices!

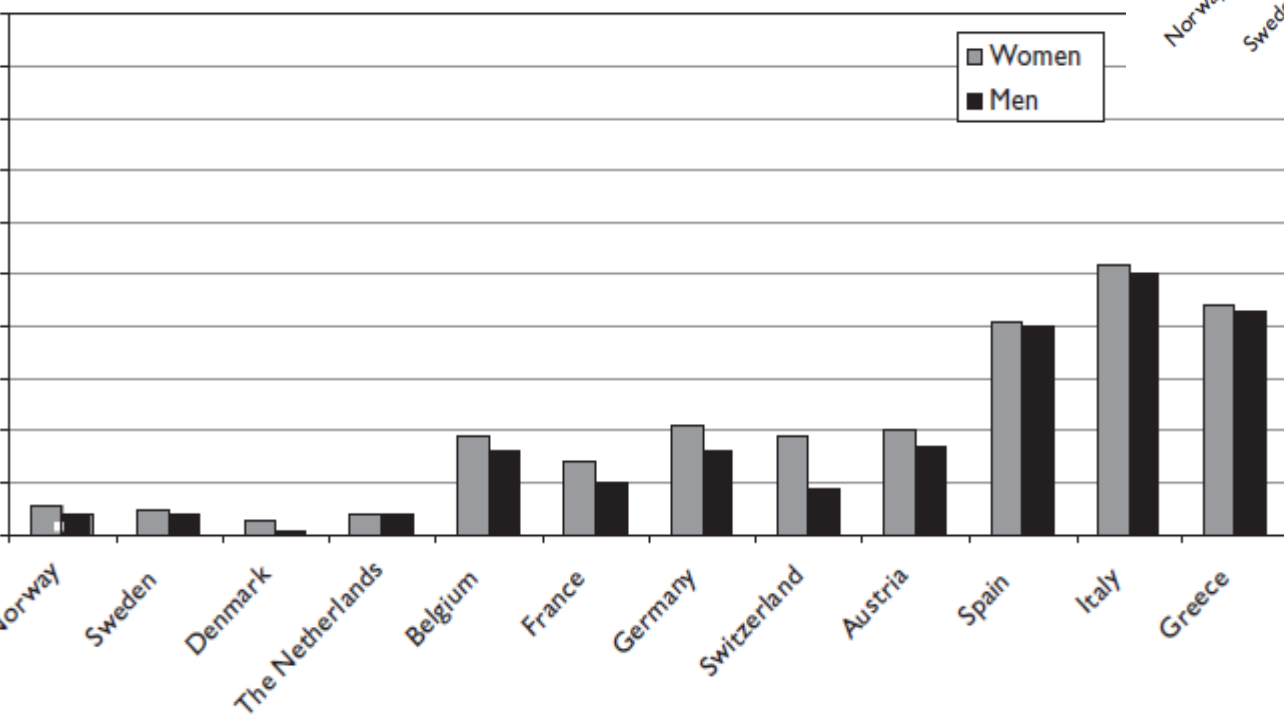
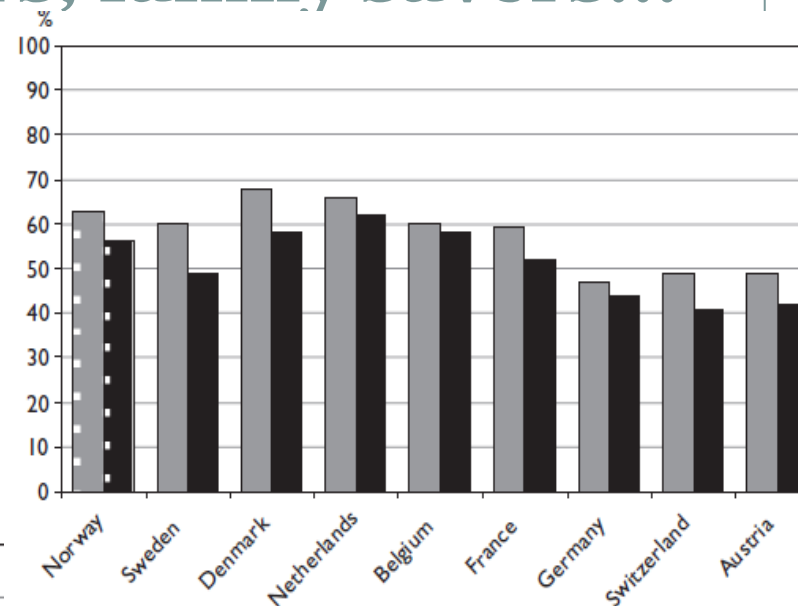
= their AGENCY



# Child savers, mother savers, family savers...

Grandparents  
plus

We champion the wider  
family who care for children





# Contemporary grandparenting

Changing family relationships  
in global contexts



Edited by Sara Arber and Virpi Timonen

# Divorce in the middle generation



- Relatively new phenomenon in Ireland
- Very widespread in many other countries

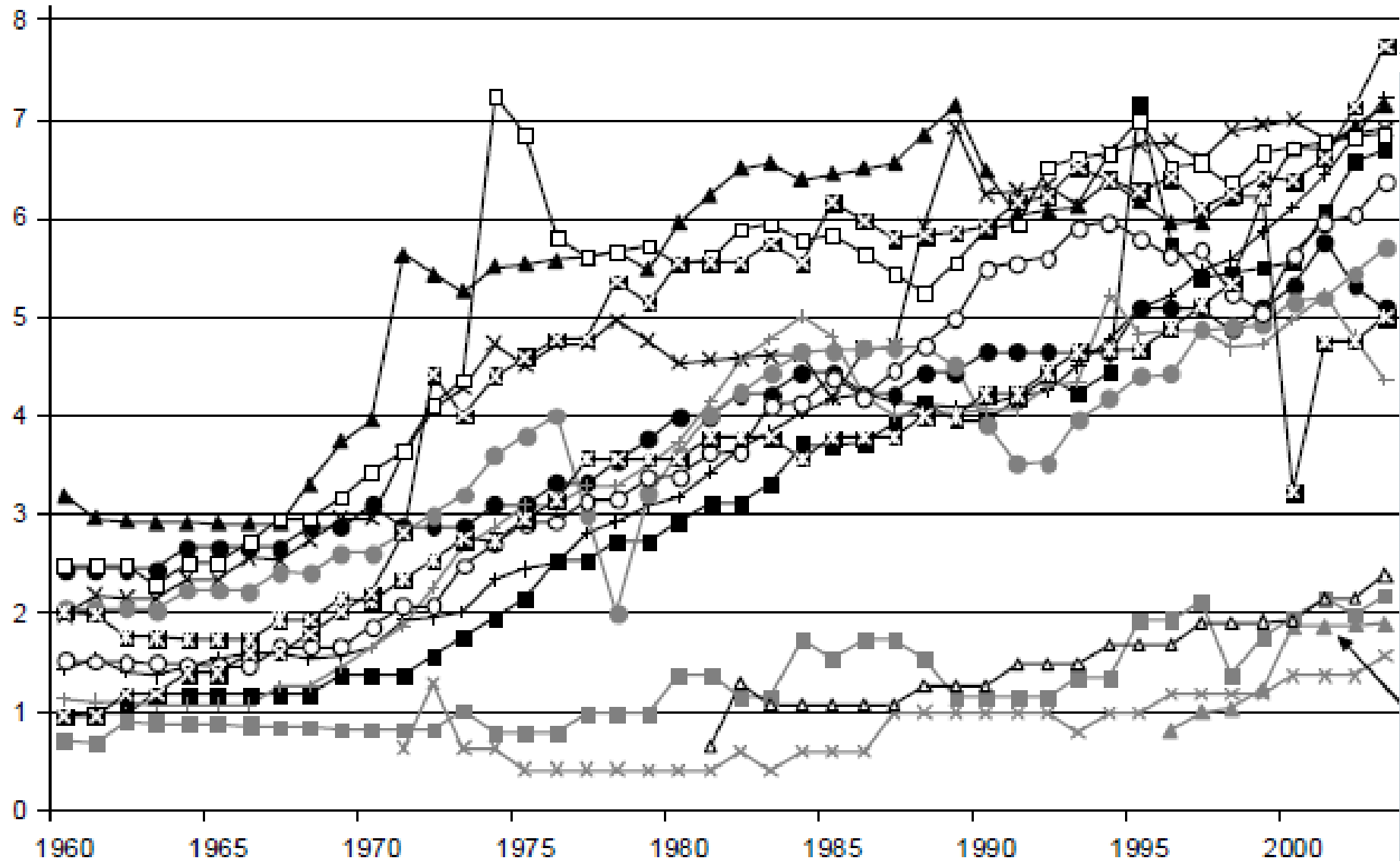
## **What are the implications for grandparents?**

Literature suggests:

- Separation and divorce lead to at least a temporal increase in the intensity of inter-generational ties, especially in contexts where there are young children
- Middle generation remains influential – possibly becoming more influential
- Negative emotions; adverse impact on well-being; Problems in a child's marriage strain the adult child-parent relationship – disappointment, shame, perceived stigma, criticism
- (Unmarried) fathers' rights weak – ramifications for paternal grandparents

# Divorce in Ireland – EU context

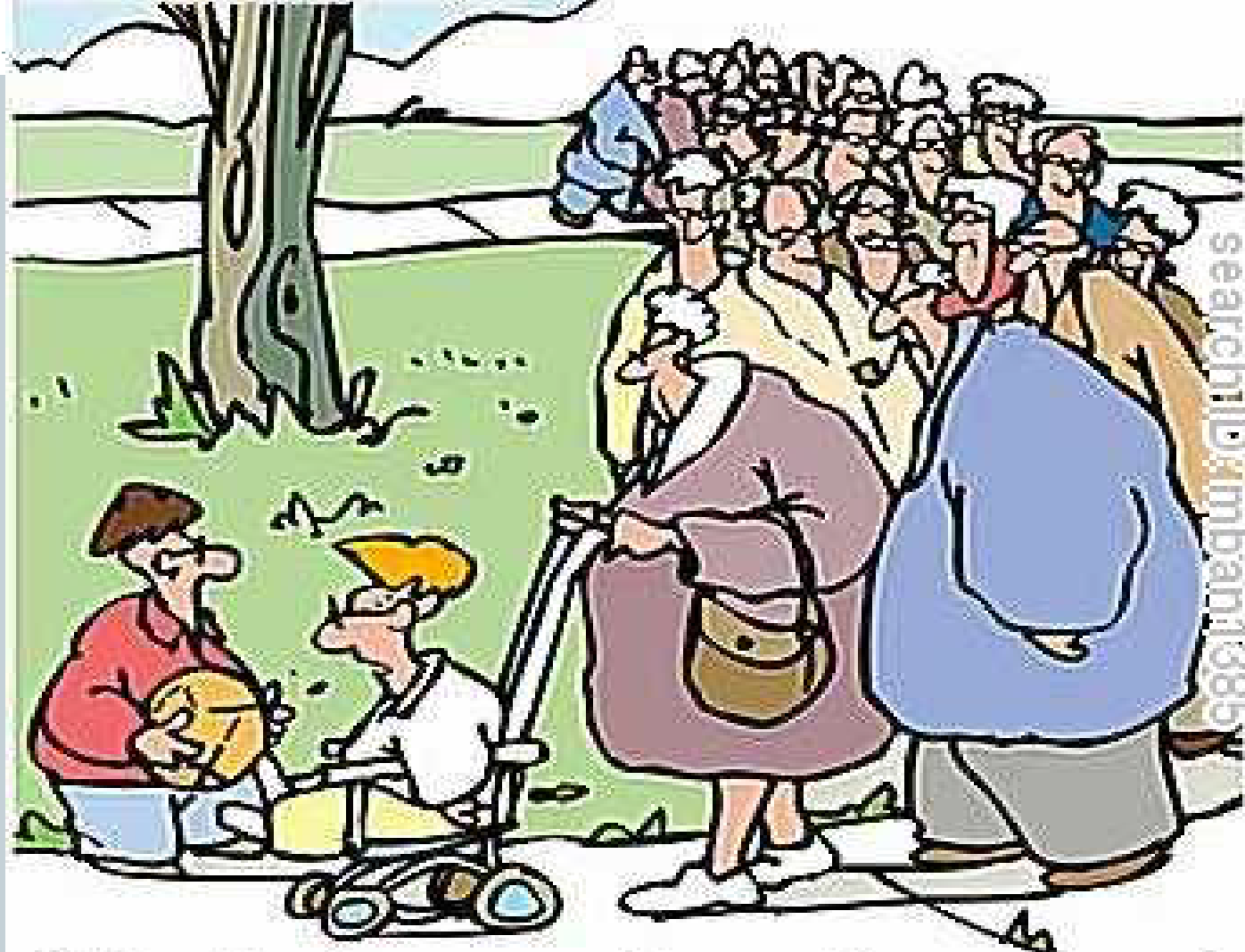
(Annual divorces per 1,000 married persons) Source: Lunn, Fahey and Hannan 2009



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*Baldwin*



“Thanks to separations, divorces and remarriages, I’ve got 20 grandparents.”

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“We were only staying together for the kids. Now  
we’re only staying together for the grandkids.”

# ROBBED OF OUR GRANDSONS

**WHEN** Helen McDonald's son and daughter-in-law separated four years ago, she and her husband Bill were cut out of their grandsons' lives.

The couple (pictured) had enjoyed seeing the boys regularly but after the marriage breakdown the boys' mother refused to let them see or speak to their grandparents.

'It was terrible,' said Mrs McDonald, a 65-year-old retired nurse. 'We were cut out of their lives, just like that. I cried for months.'

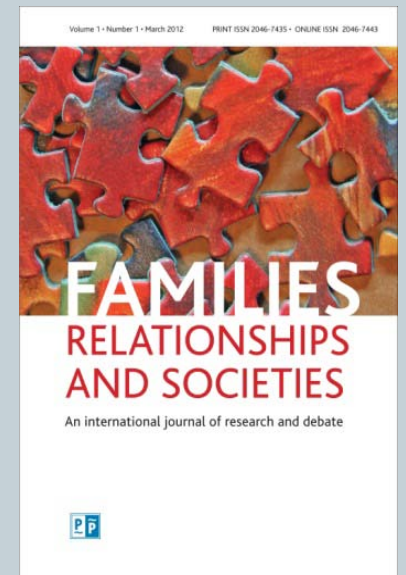
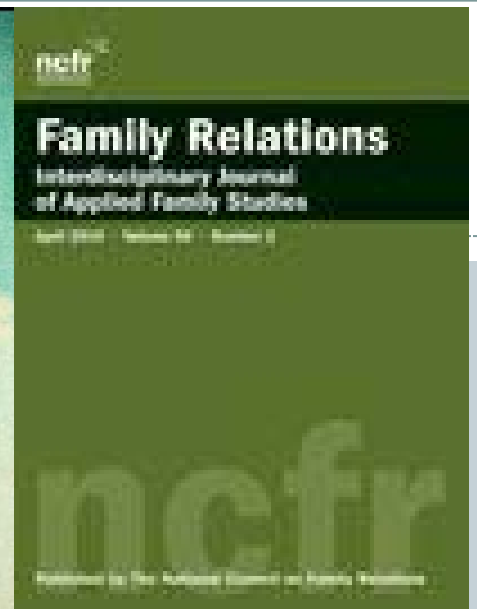
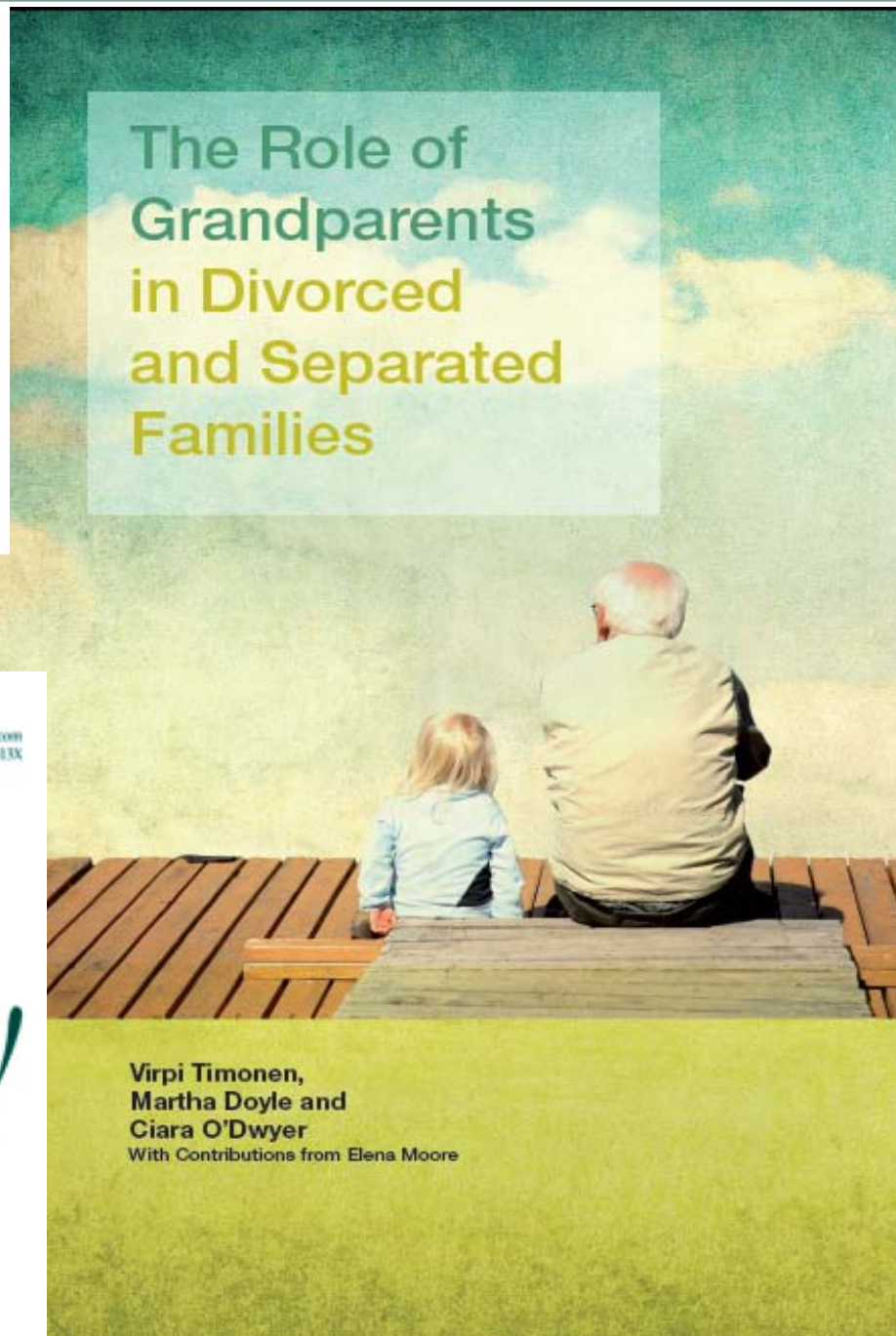
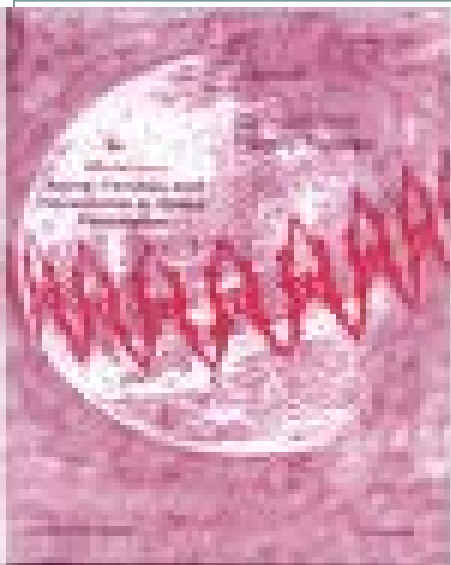
The couple spent two years and thousands of pounds fighting for access. But a reunion



happened only after the older boy, now 18, phoned to say he was coming to stay.

'When we couldn't see them it was terrible,' said Mrs McDonald, from Ayrshire.

'Whatever happens with their parents, they're still your family. Grandparents are important for grandchildren.'



# Rationale for research



- Experiences and changes in roles of grandparents *from their own perspective* poorly understood
- Context that combines the liberal welfare state, recent availability of divorce, particularly suited to studying grandparenting in divorced families
- Literature suggests powerful structural constraints, weak agency and negative repercussions for grandparents

# Structure...Agency



- **Matrilineal advantage** - Mother-Daughter bond, Women as kin-keepers – fathers and paternal grandparents lose out
  - The **parent-as-mediator** theory: grandparent-grandchild relationship brokered by middle generation
  - Norms of **non-interference & obligation** (downward intergenerational solidarity)
- grandparents located within powerful structural constraints
- overlooks possibility that grandparents may be determined & successful **agents**

# Research Method



- Exploration of experiences, in a poorly understood / under-theorised field → qualitative approach
- Semi-structured interviews
- Sampling via community & support agencies, interest groups, advertisements
- (Audio-recorded, transcribed) Interviews of 30-120 minutes in duration, six of these with couples jointly
- Open, axial, selective coding

# Overview of research participants



	Maternal	Paternal	Total
Men	2	6	8
Women	10	14	24
Total	12	20	32

## Number (and %) reporting provision of different types of support to their adult child, by lineage



Support Type	Maternal (N=12)	Paternal (N= 20)	TOTAL
Financial	7 (58)	13 ( <b>65</b> )	20 ( <b>65</b> )
Emotional	6 (50)	14 ( <b>70</b> )	20 ( <b>65</b> )
Childcare	7 (58)	10 ( <b>50</b> )	17 ( <b>55</b> )
CO-residence	2 (17)	11 (55)	13 ( <b>42</b> )
Legal & other advisory	2 (17)	6 (30)	8 ( <b>26</b> )

# Compensating --- Ambivalence



...I don't think he should be living at home with his parents...He's a hard one to live with because he's very quiet, very withdrawn...But he is extremely attentive to [his daughter] and...spends good quality time with her...I would prefer if he was living [in] a home of his own that was suitable enough to bring [his daughter]...I said look you have to think of [granddaughter], you have to have somewhere stable... it took coaxing and he said okay I'll come back for a couple of months and Jesus, he's still here... (Jacinta, paternal grandmother)

# Drawing boundaries



‘I’ve *always* said...if I can’t babysit, I’m not going to feel guilty about it and if you ring me say on Friday night and it suits me, no problem, but if I have plans, my plans have been made and so that’s it’. (Alva, paternal grandmother)

‘For a while I felt I was trying to compensate for their lack of parenting and now I’m not doing that any longer. I’ve withdrawn from that and I think the danger is that you would get hooked into that role and stay with it’. (Maev, maternal grandmother)

# Developing strategies



**Hazel:** Our son is quite lucky because access isn't a problem.

**Tom:** If we didn't have such a close relationship with [son's former partner] access would have been more difficult...we always saw her as a person and I think she liked that.

**Hazel:** I mean we would both find quite often that you'd have to bite your tongue, but we have always succeeded and she would see us as being supportive

**Tom:** *You have to have a vision of where you are going...now I'm not saying that you're controlling, but you have to kind of know what's good for the child...like the thing about [the child's mother] coming to family things.*

# Exercising agency



‘And in that year [when son went abroad], I made my arrangements with my [ex] daughter-in-law...I asked her if I could see the children. And she said ‘yes’. And she allowed me to see the children every weekend...it became a more formal arrangement with *me*. So that was fine, but then my son came back...she stopped all contact completely...So, I decided that I would go to court to get my own rights as a grandparent...and I got rights [to see the grandchildren] every weekend.’

(Elsie, paternal grandmother)

# Loss of enjoyment, Resentment



I felt I started taking responsibility for his relationship with his children...Because it was like “well ma, we’ll be down on Sunday”, and so I had to be there on Sunday no matter what happened. And I was making the dinners and he wasn’t doing anything really.’

(Elsie, paternal grandmother)

# Boundary drawing



**Elsie:** I'm just sick of kids, I'm sick of looking at them. I hate them now and that's the truth (laughs). I think that there's more opportunities for grannies nowadays, like I've a lot more money than my mother ever had in her life. I've a lot more security, a lot more independence. *So I've a lot more choices than my mother ever had and I want to use them.* (...) I stepped in there with good intentions...because I was thinking of the good of the grandchild but I'm not sure if I made the decisions, I am not sure if I would do that again. *Actually, I won't do that again...*my other son split up...I don't see that child. I certainly wouldn't go to the same extremes to see her...'

# Paternal grandparents' agency



- Experienced a greater degree of change in the relationships with grandchildren than maternal grandparents
- Increased uncertainty and limited availability of time --- new demands
- Compensating for a perceived lack of sons' parenting skills
- Helped sons restructure / continue their relationship with their children
- Kin-keeping, acting as 'bridge' across dissolved family lines
- Amicable relations with 'ex' translated into easier access to grandchildren & were sometimes strategically cultivated by grandparents even where former couple's relations very poor or non-existent

# Importance of paternal grandparents



- The role of grandparents may underpin the younger generations' ability to negotiate the emotional and practical impacts of relationship breakdown
- Their actions can potentially have important future implications not only for the grandparent-grandchild relationship, but also the relationship trajectories of their adult son and child in the post-separation family
- The actions of grandparents whose children are not economically secure are particularly apposite since their sons relationships with their children are at an increased risk of being discontinued.

# Following adult children's divorce, grandparents...



1. **Compensate for perceived material and emotional losses** that their adult child and grandchild(ren) have experienced (solidarity --- ambivalence)
2. **Draw boundaries** around the support that they provide in order to compensate for these losses
3. **Develop and implement strategies** aimed at optimising the level of contact with their grandchildren and/or their own wellbeing

These are indicative of grandparental agency; to date under-appreciated and poorly understood

# Contributions to literature on grandparenting



1. Divorce calls for reorganising of family relationships; extent and manner of grandparents' engagement in this underappreciated
2. Grandparents seek to actively influence extent of engagement; make choices and develop strategies (to increase / reduce contact & support)
3. Middle generation important but not determining; e.g. forging of positive relationship with estranged kin possible
4. Main motive for grandparental agency wellbeing of grandchildren, but own wellbeing can be a driver

# Conclusions



- Far from the image of ‘invisible facilitators’, some grandparents emerge as active and determined actors who shape the level and nature of their involvement in the post-divorce/separation family.
- However, the research also points to considerable differences in grandparents’ ability to exercise agency, and the continuing structural pressures on many grandparents.
- Understanding variation in grandparental agency is an important task for future research.