

The Role of Grandparents in Divorced and Separated Families in Ireland



**SOME FINDINGS FROM A STUDY CONDUCTED IN
2008-2009
BY**

**VIRPI TIMONEN
MARTHA DOYLE
CIARA O'DWYER**

(WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM ELENA MOORE)

**FUNDING FROM THE FAMILY SUPPORT AGENCY
GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGED**

Background



- Increase in longevity
 - Prevalence of marital, non-marital relationship dissolution & increase lone parent, reconstituted families
- = increase in grandparents who are involved in divorced/separated families

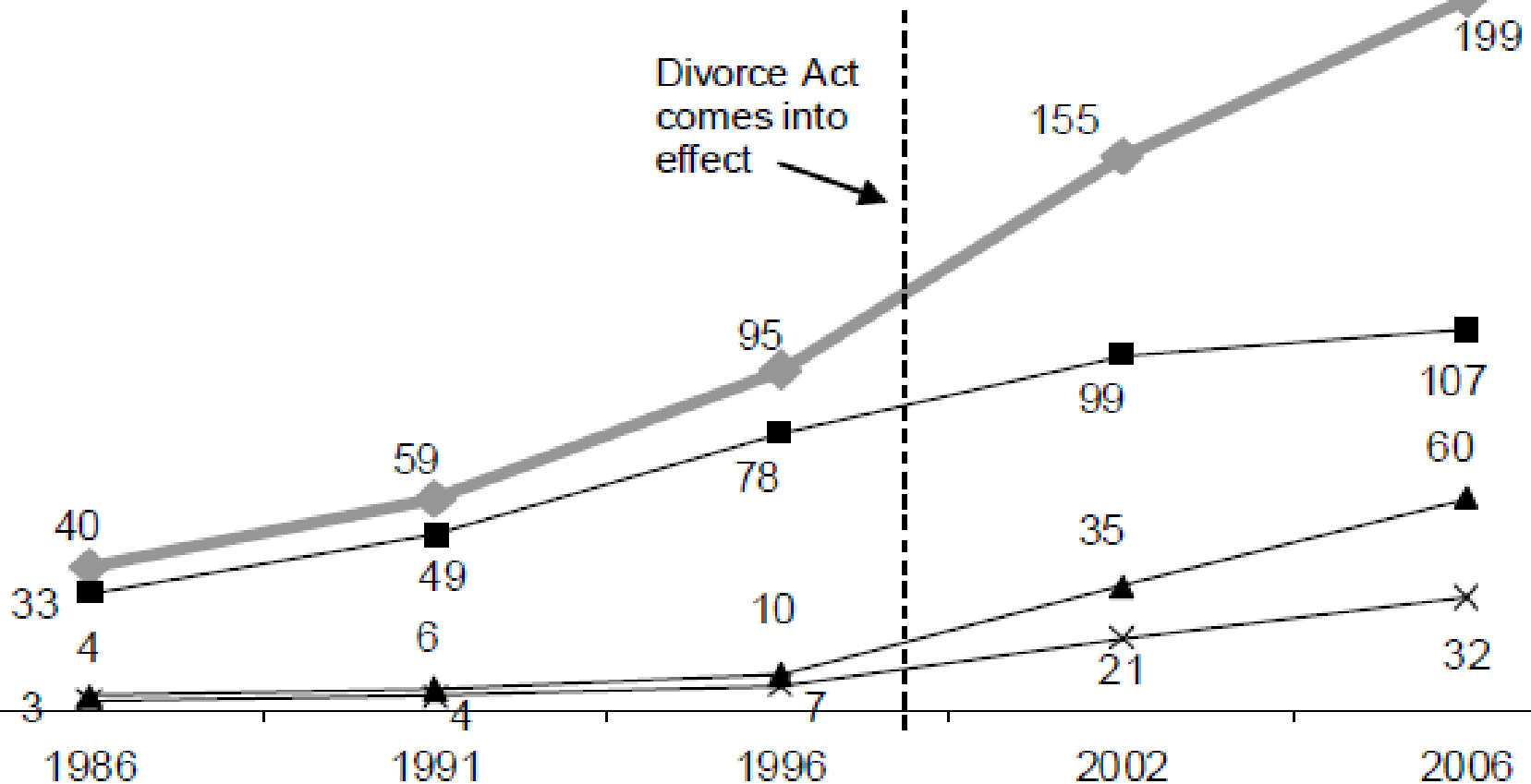
The Context in Ireland



- Divorce new (1996→); relationship dissolution of course not
- Strong growth in total number of people who have experienced marriage breakdown
- Comparatively low divorce rate

Number of divorced, separated, remarried (1,000s) in Ireland, 1986-2006

Source: Lunn, Fahey and Hannan 2009



◆ Total ■ Separated ▲ Divorced × Re-married

Irish context continued



- Comparatively low proportion of older people in the population
- Grandparents can apply for access to grandchild, granted where ‘in the best interests of the child’, no *right* to access
- Very little existing research on grandparents, virtually none on grandparents in the context of divorced / separated families
- Experiences and changes in roles of grandparents from their own perspective poorly understood

Research Method



- Exploration of experiences, in a poorly understood / under-theorised field → a 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

Sample characteristics



Table 1: Sample characteristics: Gender and lineage

	Maternal	Paternal	Both	Total
Male Respondent	2	6	0	8
Female Respondent	9	13	1	23
Total	11	19	1	31



*
Manuscript
under review

Timonen, Doyle & O'Dwyer:

'He really leant on me a lot':

Parents' Perspectives on the
Provision of Support to Divorced
and Separated Adult Children in
Ireland

Background, Literature



- Literature on intergen transfers and divorce has paid little attention to the experiences of older adults whose son or daughter has divorced /separated
- Problems in a child's marriage strain the adult child-parent relationship – disappointment, shame, criticism (Kaufman and Uhlenberg 1998)
- Separation and divorce lead to at least a temporal increase in the intensity of inter-generational ties, esp in contexts where there are young children (Sarkisian and Gerstel 2008)

Number of respondents reporting provision of different types of support to their adult child by lineage



Support Type	Maternal (N=12)	Paternal (N= 20)	TOTAL
Financial	7	13	20
Emotional	6	14	20
Childcare	7	10	17
Co-residence	2	11	13
Legal & other advisory	2	6	8

Key Findings



- Older adults whose sons and daughters have divorced / separated seek to:
- (1) compensate for the perceived losses (material & emotional) that their adult children (and grandchildren) have experienced
- (2) draw boundaries around the support that they channel to compensate for these losses.

The findings support the relevance of both the solidarity and ambivalence perspectives

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...



**Family Relations,
forthcoming 2010**



Doyle, O'Dwyer & Timonen (2010)

'How can you just cut off a whole side of the family and say move on?'

The reshaping of paternal grandparent-grandchild relationships following divorce or separation in the middle generation

Background, Literature



- Maternal grandparents are less likely to experience negative relationship changes: ‘Matrilineal advantage’ - Mother-Daughter bond, Women as kin-keepers .
- The parent-as-mediator theory: grandparent-grandchild relationship brokered by middle generation.

Key Findings



- Paternal grandparents experienced a greater degree of change in the relationships with grandchildren
- Helped sons restructure their relationship with their children
- Increased uncertainty and limited availability of time
- Erosion of trust and quality of grandparent-grandchild relationships; often attributed to main custodial parent's (mother's) behaviour



[The Grandchild] says 'Are you my family?' and I'd say 'Of course I am your family, I am your grandmother' and she'd say 'How?'...I'd say 'Well I'm your daddy's mummy and that means I am your granny...' and she'd say 'Mmmm. I want you to be my granny but my mummy keeps saying you're not.'

Findings: Facilitating the restructuring of family relationships



- Compensating for a perceived lack of sons' parenting skills, kin-keeping, acting as 'bridge' (esp. important for economically insecure sons)
→ Duty could replace enjoyment of intergen. relationships
- Parent-as-mediator theory: amicable relations with 'ex' translated into easier access to grandchildren & sometimes strategically cultivated even where former couple's relations non-existent

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.’



Manuscript under
review

O'Dwyer, Doyle, Moore &
Timonen

“We have all moved on”: How
Grandparents Cope with their
Adult Child's Relationship
Breakdown

Rationale



- Relationship breakdown can be traumatic event for both the couple, their children and the wider family, especially the couple's parents.
- Limited research on how grandparents cope.

Background



- Research into (adverse) effects of extensive (custodial) involvement / withdrawal of contact
- Difficult to know which form of support best without knowing how grandparents cope & why some people cope better than others

Prioritising needs of others



- Practical (time use, plans, work), psychological effects (stress) experienced not only by those with denied / excessive contact with grandchildren but across the sample



Delay in processing *own* emotions

Ah no [I didn't use any support services]. I suppose I was so involved in my daughter's part of it, I only wanted things to go right for her...you do without and look after your child.

Outcomes of the Process



Acceptance:

They had a horrific six months where everything was wrong... And to get on to the better side of story is that the bond I had with them is unreal...it has eased up now because their dad has a house and...they still come down and stay [here]... We have all moved on.

Suspended Animation:

I have not spoken to (my daughter-in-law) for easily three and a half months now. At this stage it's still too raw.

Factors influencing Respondents' Ability to Come to Terms with Divorce



- **Factors Outside of Grandparents Control:**
 - **Time**: allowed hurt to heal. But, process a recent occurrence for some in the acceptance group & vice versa for suspended animation group.
 - **Contact with Grandchildren**: Allowed grandparents to monitor well-being of grandchildren. Reduced contact - powerlessness.
- **Factors Within Grandparents Control**
 - **Relationship with Adult Child's Former Partner**: showing support and not taking sides helped keep lines of communication open.
 - **Use of Formal and Informal Support**: formal support not preferred option; but informal support inadequate for some. Info, advice, counselling sought; not always available.

Overall conclusions



- Help, care and support that grandparents provide to adult children, in some cases acting as bridges across the formally dissolved family lines, plays a central role in the transition to life after divorce / separation both for their adult children and grandchildren.
- Recommend development of supports for grandparents as these would translate into supporting all generations implicated in divorce and separation.