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Grandmothers: The Changing Culture

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The traditional role of the grandmother in contemporary Western society is changing. Driven in part by the increasing participation of women in the workplace, as well as declines in family stability, grandparents are taking on new responsibilities as family caretakers. This is of special interest in modern Britain. *Grandmothers* is a collection of essays reflecting on the experience of being a grandmother in modern Britain (plus, in one case, France). It follows a study of grandparenting-the first national study on the subject in the UK-carried out by the editor as part of the British Social Attitudes Survey.

Over the past few years there has been a surge of interest in Britain on grandparenting-although it is still a long way behind the United States and several European countries in research. The driving impetus for research is coming from parenting organizations and government departments concerned about the effects on female employment of shortages in nursery places, and about the effect of "parenting deficits" on children. Greater involvement of grandmothers in caring for children has seemed to offer a solution to many related problems. It promises to improve care within the family, and enable mothers to take on paid work with fewer fears for the consequences, without removing other working adults in the family from their jobs.

The original study found that the great majority of British adults thought that providing childcare support was an important part of the grandparent role. At the same time, it revealed that grandmothers' involvement was very diverse, and that many grandmothers who would like to be more active in caring for their grandchildren were excluded as a consequence of family breakdown. While comprehensive, inevitably the survey could not deal with questions about change over the last few generations. The personal case-studies in this volume fill that gap.

The generation now moving into grandparenthood was active in restructuring personal relationships when younger. Several of the contributors to the book were prominent members of the women's movement in the late sixties and seventies. Inevitably there are more novelists, academics, and activists than is representative of the general population. But the volume manages to collect together a very wide range of lifestyles and views. Collectively, they show how far the revolution of their youth into senior family roles, and how their new roles may be encouraging them to question and revise their former attitudes.

Geoff Dench is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Community Studies and professor of sociology at Middlesex University. He is the author of *Transforming Men* and *Rewriting the Sexual Contract*, both published by Transaction.

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