

Published in final edited form as:

J Fam Hist. 2020 April 01; 45(2): 158–171. doi:10.1177/0363199019865924.

“An Extraordinarily Pernicious Influence”: The Discursive Figure of the Spoiling Grandmother before 1937

Robbie Duschinsky^{1,iD}, Deborah Jacobvitz², Lucy Peake³, Serena Messina⁴

¹Department of Public Health and Primary Care, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, United Kingdom

²University of Texas, Austin, TX, USA

³Grandparents Plus, London, United Kingdom

⁴Austin Child Guidance Center, Austin, TX, USA

Abstract

Discourses about the dangers of spoiling children and images of grandparents came together in nineteenth-century literature, with the literary figure of the spoiling grandmother emerging as familiar cultural currency. From there, it would become a concern for the generation of psychoanalysts after Freud, for whom the grandmother represented a dangerous supplement to the importance of the mother for a child’s psychological development. The literary and the psychological uses of the figure of the spoiling grandmother then intersected in scientific and popular guidance for parents in the battle for authority regarding the right way to engage in childcare.

Keywords

grandmothers; spoiling; grandparents; literature; psychoanalysis

The figure of the “spoiling grandmother” is likely a familiar one today. Tabloid headlines warn: “Parents are being ‘run ragged’ by their children when they get back from their grandparents because they’ve been so spoilt.”¹ And psychologists write popular books about how grandparents should behave to negotiate the potential problem of spoiling.² Such discourses enjoin a moral expectation of grandparental availability, but only the actions needed to supplement mother which is made to appear as common sense: “being there,” not “interfering.”³ In doing so, these discourses help organize and negotiate the boundaries

iD ORCID iD

Robbie Duschinsky <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2023-5328>

Corresponding Author: Robbie Duschinsky, Department of Public Health and Primary Care, University of Cambridge, Forvie Site, Robinson Way, Cambridge CB2 0SR, United Kingdom. rd522@medschl.cam.ac.uk.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

¹Daily Mail, May 28, 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2332250/Parents-run-ragged-children-grandparents-theyve-spoilt.html>.

²For example, V. Lansky, *101 Ways to Spoil Your Grandchild* (Milton Keynes, UK: McGraw Hill, 2006); S. Moore and D. Rosenthal, *Grandparenting: Contemporary Perspectives* (London, UK: Routledge, 2016).

around the role of parent and grandmother and a distribution of authority. Yet a common research finding since Cunningham–Burley’s work⁴ has been that grandparents are unable to define spoiling, give examples of spoiling, or cite instances in their families where it has occurred—the notion seems to rely on a general and hazy admonition. This admonition is also a gendered one, with the grandmother held responsible for supporting the child’s mother in her ostensive natural role.

This might lead to the suspicion that ideas about spoiling are merely a technique for denigrating grandparents and policing the boundaries between generations. And certainly some grandparents regard the association between their role and the idea of “spoiling” as stigmatizing and disempowering.⁵ Yet it is a polyvalent discursive form, capable of a variety of uses, including by grandparents themselves. In Rosenthal and Moore’s survey research, the chance to “spoil them a bit” was cited as among the best things about having a grandchild.⁶ An extract from their qualitative interviews offers an illustration of the continued purchase of the discourse and its potential role for negotiating affectively laden lines of authority and family roles:

Replying to the question: “What do you think is the role of a grandmother?,” Jenny said: “Oh to spoil rotten, to spoil rotten. And if I could give an example, my son had a drug issue for a long time and injected heroin every day. Anyway we’d had tea and Will, my grandson, must have been in his pyjamas. My son had bathed him and he’s come out to the kitchen and I’ve given Will some chocolate. So down comes my son, hands on hips: “Can’t believe you Mum. I thought you’d know better than to give him chocolate after tea.” I’ve just looked at my son and said “Who are you who injects every drug that’s known to man, going crook at me?” And what did he say? Oh he just rubbed me on the top of the head and laughed. But he told me I wasn’t to give Will chocolate again after tea. And I said “But that’s what nanas do.”⁷

For Jenny, the image of the spoiling grandmother is one that can support the assertion of a grandparent’s benign right to give treats. On the other hand, its use here may also suggest the weakness of other available discursive forms for claiming relevance as a grandparent.

Indeed, despite its familiar feel, the image of the spoiling grandparent may be regarded as having an outdated or hollow quality now. Yet alternative images of the relationship between grandparenthood and food and power have not supplanted it, leaving a lack of alternative problematizations and a neglect of grandparental childcare as a matter of concern. Gray and colleagues note “a significant growth in scholarship on intergenerational relationships, and particularly on the relationships between grandparents and grandchildren.”⁸ Yet this growth

³V. May, J. Mason, and L. Clarke, “Being There Yet Not Interfering: The Paradoxes of Grandparenting,” in *Contemporary Grandparenting: Changing Family Relationships in Global Contexts*, eds., S. Arber and V. Timonen (Bristol, UK: The Policy Press, 2012), 139–58; M. Breheny, C. Stephens, and L. Spilsbury, “Involvement without Interference: How Grandparents Negotiate Intergenerational Expectations in Relationships With Grandchildren,” *Journal of Family Studies* 19, no. 2 (2013): 174–84.

⁴S. Cunningham-Burley, “Constructing Grandparenthood: Anticipating Appropriate Action,” *Sociology* 19, no. 3 (1985): 421–36.

⁵A. Gauthier, “The Role of Grandparents,” *Current Sociology* 50, no. 2 (2002): 295–307; R. Mann, “Out of the Shadows? Grandfatherhood, Age and Masculinities,” *Journal of Aging Studies* 21, no. 4 (2007): 281–91.

⁶D. Rosenthal and S. Moore, *New Age Nana: Being a Grandmother in the 21st Century* (Big Sky Publishing, 2012).

⁷*Ibid.*, 36.

has been uneven between disciplines. The changing demography of family life—as well as the availability of relevant cohort studies—has led cultural historians and sociologists to pay increased attention to grandparents and their importance in contemporary family life.⁹ There has also been important work in the demography of grandparenthood and intergenerational households, for instance, by Gunhild Hagestad.¹⁰ Cultural psychologists have also documented the variety of constructions of grandparenthood across different societies, highlighting contingencies in the ways the care they provide for children is perceived.¹¹

Yet, in other disciplines, the role of grandparents in childcare remains too often neglected, or treated as an afterthought, and with areas of social policy informed by stereotypes rather than accurate representations or careful empirical attention. To give one example, there has been a growing interest in infant nutrition within developmental psychology, epidemiology, and nursing research, particularly prompted by problematizations of child obesity and maternal mental health.¹² Yet, within this literature, studies of the role of grandparents have relied almost exclusively on parent report, with the experiences of grandparents themselves treated as of little relevance in the research. As a result, images of grandparental spoiling remain generally unchallenged. Among other scholars, Eli has urged for a need for “a new analytic framework, and beyond culturally accepted concepts of grandparental feeding practices as merely ‘spoiling’ of children.”¹³

The figure of the spoiling grandmother is, when a history is sought, usually traced back to Hermann Vollmer’s 1937 paper in the *Journal of Orthopsychiatry* by social scientists and historians.¹⁴ Vollmer argued that the clinical and social sciences, and all practitioner experience, point to the same very same discovery that “grandmothers exert an extraordinarily pernicious influence on their grandchildren.”¹⁵ We do not disagree that Vollmer’s paper was a watershed moment for medical, social scientific, and public discussions of the role of the grandmother in caregiving. Yet accounts that situate Vollmer as the origin of the idea make it seem to be the stigmatizing product of one clinician’s perspective on human families and behavior. Vollmer’s debt to European cultural and scientific currents is thereby sidelined, and with it a sense of what concerns had already become invested in this image.

⁸J. Gray, R. Geraghty, and D. Ralph, “Young Grandchildren and Their Grandparents: A Secondary Analysis of Continuity and Change across Four Birth Cohorts,” *Families, Relationships and Societies* 2, no. 2 (2013): 289–98, 289.

⁹For example, R. S. Hanks, “Grandma, What Big Teeth You Have!” The Social Construction of Grandparenting in American Business and Academe,” *Journal of Family Issues* 22, no. 5 (2001): 652–76; A. Knight, R. O’Connell, and J. Brannen, “The Temporality of Food Practices: Intergenerational Relations, Childhood Memories and Mothers’ Food Practices in Working Families with Young Children,” *Families, Relationships & Societies* 3, no. 2 (2014): 303–318; R. Geraghty, J. Gray, and D. Ralph, “One of the Best Members of the Family’: Continuity and Change in Young Children’s Relationships with Their Grandparents,” in *The Irish Family*, ed. L. Connelly (London, UK: Routledge, 2015), 124–39; J. Cundy, “Supporting Young Dads’ Journeys through Fatherhood,” *Social Policy and Society* 15, no. 1 (2016): 141–53; K. Eli, et al. “Water, Juice, or Soda? Mothers and Grandmothers of Preschoolers Discuss the Acceptability and Accessibility of Beverages,” *Appetite* 112 (2017): 133–42.

¹⁰For example, K. Herlofson and G. O. Hagestad, “Transformations in the Role of Grandparents across Welfare States,” in *Contemporary Grandparenting: Changing Family Relationships in Global Context*, eds. S. Arber and T. Timonen (Bristol: Policy Press, 2012), 27–49.

¹¹Z. Hossain, G. Eisberg, and D. W. Shwalb, “Grandparents’ Social Identities in Cultural Context,” *Contemporary Social Science* 13, no. 2 (2018): 275–87.

¹²See, for example, N. Ikeda, K. Fuse, and N. Nishi, “Changes in the Effects of Living with No Siblings or Living with Grandparents on Overweight and Obesity in Children: Results from a National Cohort Study in Japan,” *PLoS One* 12, no. 4 (2017): e0175726.

¹³K. Eli, et al. “A Question of Balance: Explaining Differences between Parental and Grandparental Perspectives on Preschoolers’ Feeding and Physical Activity,” *Social Science & Medicine* 154 (2016): 28–35, 29.

¹⁴For example, A. Kornhaber, *Contemporary Grandparenting* (London, UK: Sage, 1995).

¹⁵H. Vollmer, “The Grandmother: A Problem in Child-rearing,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 7, no. 3 (1937): 378–82, 378.

We will document a longer history of the idea of the spoiling grandmother, stretching back beyond Vollmer's 1937 article. In doing so, we hope to understand the roots of this figure, further denaturalize it, and clear the ground for alternative images and accounts. Our approach and theoretical position is one influenced by Foucault: we are interested to examine the emergence of a discursive figure, offering a close examination of points of continuity and discontinuity as this figure has been shaped and reshaped across different institutional spaces.¹⁶ Attention to a discursive figure, in turn, offers a window out on to changing perceptions of social problems and their causes, in this case problems around caregiving, intergenerational transmission, and the upbringing of children. Our examination of the figure of the spoiling grandmother also serves as an episode in the wider cultural history of the considerable intertwinement of feeding, gender, class, and care.¹⁷ Our study is limited to written sources published or translated into English. As an analysis of a discursive figure, we limited our materials to those explicitly using the language of "spoiling" in discussions of grandparental care. This article focuses on our findings from European sources prior to Vollmer's paper; though nineteenth-century US sources were also examined, the figure of the spoiling grandmother was by no means as prominent. These sources are therefore left outside the scope of the present article.

Spoiling Grandmothers in Victorian Literature

The idea that children can be "spoiled" by their care has a long history, situated within the wider trajectory in Europe of protestant ideas in which childhood was deployed as a symbol of human innate sinfulness. In general, spoiling discourse situated children as in possession of a will that needed to be held in check and disciplined, in the name of morality and health; this tradition recruited as textual support the passage in Proverbs 13:24: "He that spares his rod, hates his son."¹⁸ The notion that a lack of harshness with children was to be regarded as "spoiling" was common currency by the eighteenth century in discussions of the formation of a child's character, if by no means the only frame of reference for thinking about childcare. Negotiating spoiling discourse, in *Tom Jones* Fielding writes of "One Daughter, whom in vulgar Language he and his Wife had spoiled; that is, had educated with the utmost Tenderness and Fondness."¹⁹

Yet we have found no reference prior to the nineteenth century in which spoiling discourse is attached to a figure of the grandparent in any specific or integral way. Before this, the focus was on parents as the potential source of spoiling, and the emphasis is on the value of physical chastisement. The intersection between spoiling discourse and the figure of the grandparent, at least in English, appears first to have occurred in the female-authored Victorian three-volume novel. The earliest such specification of spoiling discourse to the grandmother that we have found is from 1853, in a work by Maria La Touche. La Touche is best known now as the mother of Rose La Touche, John Ruskin's child student and muse. However, Maria's personal experiences of familial bereavement and national and class

¹⁶M. Foucault, *The Abnormal* (1974–1975; repr., London, UK: Palgrave, 2003).

¹⁷See E. J. Abbots, A. Lavis, and M. L. Attala, eds., *Careful Eating: Bodies, Food and Care* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2015).

¹⁸J. H. Fitz-Gibbon, *Corporal Punishment, Religion, and United States Public Schools* (London, UK: Palgrave, 2017).

¹⁹H. Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 775.

displacement inform *The Clintons: Or Deeps and Shallows of Life*, one of her two novels on romance across the Protestant-Catholic divide in Ireland and written before Ruskin was hired as her daughter's tutor. In *The Clintons*, Mr. Despond is interrogated by a neighbor about the protestant Mrs. Herbert, who is serving as his children's governess in England:

“Shall you take her to Ireland with you when you return there?” asked Mrs Lynne. “Yes” replied Mr Desmond, “I certainly hope to do so; she will be a great advantage to the children when there—some little antidote to their poor grandmother's spoiling; and Mrs Herbert has so much tack that she will not offend my aunt even while opposing her.” “Oh! Poor Mrs Desmond!” Said Mrs Lynne in her most sympathising tones, “how can she help spoiling your little girls, the children of those so near and dear to her? She must love them with all her heart.” “And therefore, mamma,” said Barbara, “she ought not to spoil them.” “She is kind, but injudicious, and full of old Irish prejudices” said Mr Desmond.²⁰

Mrs. Desmond, the paternal grandmother, is spoken about affectionately here. She expresses a valued feminine role in offering nurture and care to the family's children. However, the grandmother is thought to hold the prejudices about childcare associated with tradition, leading to a tendency to indulge the children in expressing her affection, even if this is in fact harmful to their well-being and class enculturation.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the integration of the grandmother with the idea of spoiling was still new and not quite fluent. It still generally required quote marks to indicate that one discourse is being lifted into another, without quite belonging there. For instance, in Lowe's *The Life and Works of Goethe*, Goethe's grandmother is described as having “‘spoiled’ them of course, and gave them many an eatable, which they would get only in her room.”²¹ By the 1860s, however, such textual markers of discursive intersection have disappeared, and the idea of spoiling as a harmful expression of feminine love becomes increasingly integral to the image of the grandmother as care-giver, even if held off from full criticism by the gently mocking tone of the authors. Characteristic of this implication, and the tone in which it was offered, is Katharine Sarah Macquoid, who in the third volume of *Hester Kirton*, describes Mrs. Frank as “a most exemplary grandmother, spoiling and over-feeding the children to her heart's content, and never allowing any one to find fault with them, but herself.”²²

In the new discursive appeals to the figure of the spoiling grandmother, the grandmother in question occasionally provided only temporary care. For example, in *Who are the happy ones? or, Home sketches* from The Young Ladies Library, Mr. Marsden confronts Percy's mother about the harm done to his character by his grandmother. Mr. Marsden observes that Percy is “generous, truthful, bold, affectionate, passionate,” but also “headstrong, selfish, and his selfishness has been so increased by his grandmother's spoiling fondness that it almost obscures his strong family affection.”²³ The grandmother's indulgence of the child's

²⁰M. P. La Touche, *The Clintons: Or, Deeps and Shallows of Life* (London, UK: Bentley, 1853), 37.

²¹G. H. Lowe, *The Life and Works of Goethe* (Leipzig, Germany: Brockhaus, 1855), 22.

²²K. S. Macquoid, *Hester Kirton* (Vol. 3., Smith, Elder & Co., 1864), 27.

²³Anonymous, *Who Are the Happy Ones? or, Home Sketches* (Gloversville, NY: The Young Ladies Library, 1875).

wishes is here seen as warping the child's instincts, and even the instinctive affection that more properly should belong to the nuclear family, and specifically to the mother.

However, more often, the figure of the spoiling grandmother became salient in nineteenth-century literature when the grandmother had more full-time care of the child. This occurred when the mother was for some reason unable to adequately look after the children, and so another female had to be found. Sometimes this could be, as in La Touche's *The Clintons*, because of a moral flaw, as with Mrs. Clinton who is too "weak, vain, restless in both thought and feeling" to serve all the functions of a mother.²⁴ The grandmother was also sometimes recruited in the context of colonial work undertaken by parents, where having a small child along would not be easy. In the story "Daisy's Dilemmas" in *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*, Daisy is introduced as having "lived with her grandmother while her father and her mother were in the West Indies, and her grandmother had spoiled her up to her innocent blue eyes, and always let her have her own way in everything."²⁵

However, above all, the potential for the grandmother to spoil the children was foregrounded when a child went to live with the grandmother due to the death of the mother. Through the second half of the nineteenth century, life span for women was rapidly increasing in Britain with no corresponding fall in maternal mortality in childbirth.²⁶ This meant that grandmothers were increasingly present in the life of their daughter or daughter-in-law, in a way that had not been the case in the past. It also made the conditions more likely for a grandmother to outlive a mother. In a short story in the *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier*, Hurd tells that "Taffy's mother died before he was two years old, and he was left to the care of his grandmother, who spoiled pretty much as all grandmothers spoil their children's children, when the opportunity is given them. His father, unsettled by his loss, went to Australia, and afterwards to California; and now after two year's absence was on his way back again."²⁷ By the 1870s, this idea that grandmothers spoil their children's children if given the opportunity had become such stable and common expectation that the protagonist of Charlotte Riddell's *Home, Sweet Home* must explicitly and insistently repudiate any such implication: "grandmother was not reproached for 'spoiling me' and for 'indulging me as she had never done any of her own children.'"²⁸

In the early twentieth century, the spoiling grandmother appears to have become something of a stock character, perhaps dangerous to the child's development but almost always treated with affection by the writer for their feminine generosity. Authors seem able to presume on knowledge of this figure from their readers. For instance, in *Meg and the Others*, Harriet Comstock stages a battle between the maternal and paternal grandmothers, and thus the two sides of the family. "Grandma Thompson, who lived at the farm, did not believe in noticing and spoiling children; she thought it better to train them to ask no questions, obey without

²⁴La Touche, "The Clintons," 8.

²⁵Anonymous, "Daisy's Dilemmas," *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly* 26 (1888): 362.

²⁶G. Chamberlain, "British Maternal Mortality in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 99, no. 11 (2006): 559–63; Office of National Statistics, English Life Tables No.17, 2015, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies/bulletins/englishlifetablesno17/2015-09-01>; see also S. Ruggles, "Intergenerational Coresidence and Family Transitions in the United States, 1850–1880," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 73, no. 1 (2011): 136–48.

²⁷C. E. Hurd, *Taffy White's Christmas* (Bangor Daily Whig & Courier, Saturday, January 1, 1876).

²⁸J. H. Riddell, *Home, Sweet Home: A Novel* (Vol. 3, London, UK: Tinsley, 1873), 26.

explanations, and make as little noise as possible.”²⁹ Yet, at Christmas time, the other side of the family arrive at the farm: “At last the Boy’s family came into sight. On the front seat were the father and the Boy. Behind were the mother and the nice old grandma, who did believe in spoiling children, and meant to give Grandma Thompson a lesson.”³⁰ Indeed, the spoiling grandmother was sufficiently familiar that it was available for use in fables for children. A story in the *Kingergarten-Primary Magazine* tells of “the wolf that wanted a grandmother”: “He had no father nor mother nor grandmother, and he particularly wanted a grandmother. Someone had told him that grandmothers spoiled their grandchildren, and this wolf wanted to be spoiled.”³¹

We would draw out two functions that the figure of the spoiling grandmother seems to be serving in nineteenth century anglophone literature. A first function was narrative. Attention to the threat posed by the grandmother in the care and enculturation of the child could readily allow authors to dramatize how identity might be passed on or disrupted across generations. The grandmother was, like the governess with whom she was sometimes compared,³² a narrative element particularly suited to addressing the destabilization and restabilization of the family as the locus of Victorian cultural and class transmission. “Spoiling” through giving a child everything functioned as a constitutive outside to the process of cultural and class transmission, in which the child received a desirable, shaping influence. The grandmother also had narrative functions in symbolizing the importance of femininity to this process of transmission, as well as some of the tensions of affinal kinship, where these might express different images of enculturation.

A second function of the specific attachment of spoiling discourse to the figure of the grandmother was explanatory. In the stories, where the mother is absent or dead, either the grandmother or a governess must be recruited to provide childcare. In such circumstances, children were observed to show behavioral problems, for instance, becoming withdrawn and inattentive or at times hyperactive and overeating. Today, due in part to the legacy of Bowlby’s attachment theory,³³ it would be common to attribute such disruptions of mood and eating behavior as expectable responses by a child to experiences of loss. For Victorian literary writers, such behavior among bereaved children had its cause in the overindulgent care provided by grandmothers, to whom the children were transferred in the mother’s absence.

Psychoanalysis

These two functions were also important in the recruitment of the image of the spoiling grandmother to psychoanalytic discourse after Freud. This is the first sustained nonfiction appearance of the discursive figure we could find. The psychoanalytic community was very concerned to understand factors impacting the stabilization or destabilization of the nuclear

²⁹H. Comstock, *Meg and the Others* (New York: T. Y. Crowell & Co., 1906), 16.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 53.

³¹Anonymous, “The Wolf That Wanted a Grandmother,” *Kingergarten-Primary Magazine* 41, no. 2 (1929): 154.

³²D. R. Regaignon, “Instructive Sufficiency: Re-reading the Governess through Agnes Grey,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 29, no. 1 (2001): 85–108.

³³J. Bowlby, “The Growth of Independence in the Young Child,” *Royal Society of Health Journal* 76, no. 9 (1955): 587–91; J. Bowlby, “Ethology and the Development of Object Relations,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 41 (1960): 313–17.

family and the origins of pathological behavior in children. In the early years of psychoanalysis, Freud's greater focus was on the importance of fathers than of mothers. As a consequence, grandfathers received much greater attention initially in psychoanalytic theorizing. However, in the generation following Freud, grandmothers came to be regarded as the more significant problem, as a result of the disruption they could provide in the unfolding of the Oedipus complex with the mother.

The issue of the grandparent was first evidence in Freud's correspondence with Fleiss, in which he interpreted the figure of the grandfather in a dream by Fleiss as a displaced substitute for his anxieties regarding his father.³⁴ Yet in the published case study of the Wolf Man, Freud reports that a number of patients had told him of specific fears of being eaten or attacked, which could be traced back to remarks threatening play made by grandfathers.³⁵ Apparent in Freud's two considerations is a tension between the grandparent as merely a displacement of the unbearable importance attached to the parent, and the grandparent as themselves important, and as such capable of disrupting healthy development in ways that generalize to wider worries and phobias.

Freud's colleague Karl Abraham took a strong stance on this issue. For him, any importance attached by his patients a grandparent was epiphenomenal, an effect of the Oedipal rejection of the father or mother:

In my work as a psychoanalyst I have always been struck by the fact that some neurotic and psychotic patients would always return to speaking of their grandfather or grandmother ... However much these cases differed from one another, their analysis invariably led to one uniform conclusion: their special emphasis given to the grandfather or grandmother was always rooted in a violent rejection of the father or mother.³⁶

Ultimately, Abraham observes "the patient can direct his vituperation against his grandmother or great-grandmother far more freely than against his mother,"³⁷ and for this reason, love or hate directed toward the grandmother should generally be regarded by the psychoanalyst as a displaced form of rejection of the parent.

For the other of Freud's great early followers, Sándor Ferenczi, a grandparent was ideally adapted to serve as a symbol condensing the child's love and hate for the parent. On the one hand, the grandparent stands at the origin of the parent and is therefore a marker that the parent was not always dominant and can therefore be overthrown. Furthermore, Ferenczi argues, the grandparent is a marker of the parent's potential frailty and mortality: "If the father of my father can die, then my father will die some day, too (and I shall get possession of his privileges)."³⁸ However, in contrast to Abraham, Ferenczi ascribed greater importance

³⁴S. Freud, "Letter 60 from Extract from the Fliess Papers," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 1, London, UK: Vintage, 1897), 245–47.

³⁵S. Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. J. Strachey (Vol. 17, London, UK: Hogarth Press, 1918), 286.

³⁶K. Abraham, *Some Remarks on the Rôle of the Grandparents in the Psychology of the Neuroses* (Clinical Papers and Essays on Psychoanalysis, London, UK: Karnac, 1913), 44.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 45.

³⁸S. Ferenczi, "The Grandfather Complex," in *Further Contributions to the Theory of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Basic Books, 1913), 323–24.

to the actual behavior of the grandparent for the child, albeit in shaping how they come to be used as a symbol within the Oedipal struggle rather than as individuals themselves with important relationships for the child. Additionally, in Ferenczi's attention to possession and privileges, we can perhaps hear continuations of earlier literary uses of the grandmother to symbolize and narrate problems of cultural and class transmission.

Psychoanalysts of the second generation tended to follow Ferenczi's perspective, though applying it more in thinking about the grandmother than the grandfather. Ferenczi's protégé (and future president of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute), Sandor Lorand offers an example. In an important paper on the "Dynamics and Therapy of Depressive States," Lorand describes the patient, reporting that:

In his upbringing not only his mother, but also his grandmother, whom he remembered with love, took an active part. Therefore, he really had two mothers, and both of them, as analytical material revealed, deceived and deserted him. His grandmother died during his childhood and his mother had early made him independent; but his attachment to them persisted, permanently disrupting his healthy adjustment, as a result of the unconscious role of his mother in his life.³⁹

The in-but-out position and therefore the danger of the grandmother in psychoanalytic theory can be seen here. Whereas Lorand begins by noting the causal importance of both the mother and the grandmother in the patient's upbringing and mental health, by the end of the paragraph, the lines of causality have been narrowed to the "result of the unconscious role of his mother in his life."⁴⁰

Psychoanalytic concern about the status of implications of grandmaternal care became specifically linked to the image of the spoiling grandmother by Otto Fenichel, one of the most prominent orthodox psychoanalysts of the second generation. Fenichel documents a case in which adult neurosis had its origins in the experience of eighteen months "living with a grandmother, who doted on the child and spoiled it in many ways including the oral one; then a sudden expulsion from Eden, removal to the home of an excessively severe father; the result was a character ruled by one predominant motive—to have the father reimburse him for the oral gratification that the father took away."⁴¹

No mention is made of the reason the patient went to live with his grandmother: it is implied that his mother had died, but this detail is not regarded as of much relevance. Instead, Fenichel regards the spoiling the child received from his grandmother, combined with his father's later harshness, as the reason that "the patient had no occupation, lived on his father's money, and persistently regarded himself as being discriminated against." Here again, a concern with class can be heard. The enculturation of an independent middle-class young man, earning his own income, is here identified to have failed as a result of the disparity between the spoiling providing by the grandmother and the severity of the father. This combination is regarded as having led to a grievance against the father, blocking the growth of industriousness and insertion into the labor market. Problems in the feminine task

³⁹S. Lorand, "Dynamics and Therapy of Depressive States," *Psychoanalytic Review* 24, no. 4 (1937): 337–49, 342.

⁴⁰S. Freedman and B. Freedman, "The Psychology of Casanova," *Psychoanalytic Review* 20, no. 1 (1933): 73–78.

⁴¹O. Fenichel, "Outline of Clinical Psychoanalysis—Concluded," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 3 (1934): 223–302, 256.

of enculturation have resulted in the patient's inability to take up his responsibilities as a man.

From Freud through to the next generation of psychoanalytic theorists, then, attention was trained upon the Oedipal triad, and as a consequence, the figure of the grandparent was at once a necessary and a disruptive one. Grandparents were important for their originary status in relation to the Oedipal family, but this importance also continually threatened to disrupt the privilege ascribed to the mother and the father. The grandparent was therefore both significant and obscure for psychoanalytic theory, much like the governess⁴² and the sibling,⁴³ due to the emphasis on the parents–child triad as the “true” locus of psychological development and on maternal care especially. Within this discourse, between the first and the second generation of psychoanalysts, the grandmother increasingly supplanted the grandfather as the object of concern.

The Danger of Grandmothers

Nonfiction accounts focused around guidance on handling the problem of the grandparent's potential influence began early in the twentieth century, drawing on the literary figure of the “spoiling grandmother” and shaped by the rise of scientific guidance on child-rearing. An account by an anonymous father in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1913 is an unusually sustained early example.⁴⁴ On becoming a father, the author seeks advice from “Dr. Chadwick” about how to proceed with bringing up his daughter Betty. Whereas his wife's mother, resident in the house, argued that when Betty cried, she should be cared for and cuddled, Dr. Chadwick argued for firm discipline and a strict regimen with the baby, leaving Betty to cry. The author advises the reader to follow the advice of the doctor rather than the traditional practices of the grandmother which “aid in spoiling children today”: “These dear old ladies did mighty well—at least some of them did—by their children forty or fifty years ago; and they very naturally can't see that times and conditions, as well as their own viewpoints, have changed.”⁴⁵ Over the first year of her life, the author reports that his little daughter, in an effort to please him, stopped all display of negative emotions, swallowing any feelings of distress.

In the case of the *Saturday Evening Post* article, Dr. Chadwick was situated as the source of masculine modernity and knowledge, against the bad feminine traditions of the spoiling grandmother. However, in other contexts, the outlet itself took on the role of battling the grandmother in the name of modernity. In the advice column of the *Home Progress Society* magazine, one reader wrote in to ask “What course should be followed by a mother whose children are ‘spoiled’ by their grandmother?” The answer provided by the magazine was clipped and clear: “This mother should insist that her children follow her rules.”⁴⁶

Very often, the guidance offered to the public echoed themes that had appeared earlier in literary discourse. In particular, criticism of the spoiling grandmother observed that her

⁴²G. Deleuze, *Dialogues II* (New York: Athlone Press, 1987), 76.

⁴³J. Mitchell, *Siblings: Sex and Violence* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2003).

⁴⁴Anonymous, “The Training of Betty,” *Saturday Evening Post* 185, no. 7 (1913): 12–13, 65.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁶*Home Progress* (Vol. 6, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916), 237.

influence was particularly significant when an infant had lost his or her mother, and affinal kinship was at stake. In *The Problem Child at Home*, Sayles documented the case of “George,” who had been naughty and delinquent, disrespecting his stepmother. Sayles reports that George’s mother had died when he was small and that his grandmother had spoiled him over several years of care. When he returned to the father’s family after his father’s remarriage, severe conflicts with his stepmother occurred over food. Sayles emphasizes that the origins of George’s misbehavior lie in the indulgence of his grandmother, who had permitted him to reject eating food he disliked.⁴⁷

Hermann Vollmer’s 1937 “The grandmother: a problem in childrearing,” rather than the origin of the image of the spoiling grandmother, occurred on the horizon of literary, psychological, and public discourses around caregiving. In style, it most closely resembles works like Sayles, as guidance offered both to professionals and to the educated public about how to address an issue in the area of childcare, framed as grounded in social science and speaking to cultural images in wide circulation. In his 1937 paper, Vollmer is clear that he does not regard himself as the originator of the idea that grandmothers are a danger for child development; instead, his goal is the “difficult but worthwhile task to elevate that which is commonly accepted to the level of formal knowledge.”⁴⁸

The paper bears some marks of Vollmer’s own immediate history. He had been chief physician of the Kaiserin Victoria House, a leading children’s hospital in Berlin.⁴⁹ He and his artist wife had fled Nazi Germany in 1935 and by all accounts suffered from severe depression in the years that immediately followed.⁵⁰ The text on the problem posed by the grandmother and her traditional values appears to have been composed soon after recommencing clinical practice in America. This context may have inflecting the urgency of Vollmer’s opposition between the danger of appeals to tradition and the authority of bloodline (claimed by grandmothers, and by national socialists, alike) and the need instead for a modern and progressive approach to childcare. Whereas literary and previous psychoanalytic treatments of the spoiling grandmother had problematized her potential disruption to cultural and class transmission, Vollmer narrated the grandmother as a symbol of the threat of claims to transmission at the expense of the emancipatory disruption offered by science.

Vollmer’s paper begins by telling the reader about an experience in his consulting room. A seventy-year-old grandmother entered with her six-year-old granddaughter “who had recently made an airplane journey from a foreign country unescorted.”⁵¹ The context of this journey is unexplained, but apparently, the girl has subsequently suffered from problems eating and sleeping. Vollmer does not see a problem with the girl. Using the case as illustration, Vollmer goes on to make general claims about the problem of grandmothers for the development of children, by disrupting the natural processes that should take place

⁴⁷M. B. Sayles, *The Problem Child at Home* (New York: Commonwealth Fund, 1928), 98.

⁴⁸Vollmer, “Grandmother,” 382.

⁴⁹New York Times, “Noted Physician Is Suicide Here: Dr. Vollmer, Pediatrician, Developed Test for TB—Eyesight Was Failing,” October 12, 1959: 27.

⁵⁰A. Lovatt, “On Ruth Vollmer and Minimalism’s Marginalia,” *Art History* 33, no. 1 (2010): 150–69.

⁵¹Vollmer, “Grandmother,” 378.

between child and parents. Grandmothers indulge and pamper children to attract affection that would not otherwise be directed to them, seeking to “win the love of the grandchild at any price, bringing into play all the artifices of grandmotherly ‘favors’ without restraint.”⁵² The result is “the monotonous complaint that a child who was previously entirely docile has grown completely refractory since spending a summer with his grandmother.”⁵³ Rather than a particularity of some cases, “my experience has persuaded me that this phenomenon represents the operation of a law.”⁵⁴

Ultimately, Vollmer insists, “the grandmother is not a suitable custodian of the care and rearing of her grandchild: She is a disturbing factor against which we are obligated to protect the child according to the best of our ability.”⁵⁵ For Vollmer, the chief forms of protection that can be offered are the assertion of psychological and psychoanalytic science against the dangers of grandmaternal prejudice and an emphasis on the unique role of the mother—not the father, grandmother, or other substitutes—on the care and enculturation of children.⁵⁶ Implied here is an image of the scientific knowledge of the male writer, which allows him to know the place of mothers in care of children. In a later article, he elaborated his concern that “the feminist movement aimed at parity with the male socially, economically and sexually, but reached its goal only at the cost of human happiness and effectiveness. The child and society were the main losers ... The family lost its cohesiveness and children grew up in a less protective environment.”⁵⁷

Vollmer’s claims build from key aspects of the problematic established by literary attention to the figure of the grandmother in previous century. Experiences of sustained separation between child and parent, and care provided instead by a grandmother, are observed to cause children who were “previously entirely docile” to become “completely refractory.” That there is such a predictable relationship between cause (grandparental care) and consequence (delinquency) leads Vollmer to confidence that grandmothers are an extraordinarily pernicious influence. This, he is keen to emphasize, is not an original claim. Instead, it is common cultural wisdom, albeit an insight that he wishes to formalize as a scientific law in order that scientific knowledge can prevail against the mistaken authority of the grandmother, the bearer and embodiment of transmission. Again, like in the literary texts of the Victorian three-volume novel, the figure of the grandmother is an occasion for telling a wider story about the cohesion or disruption of family life, as well as about the gendered division of activities in society. This story is now reinvested as a tale about the battle between modernity and tradition.

As in the earlier psychoanalytic literature, for Vollmer, the grandmother is a dangerous supplement. The nuclear family—specifically the mother—is regarded as the natural,

⁵²Ibid., 381.

⁵³Ibid., 379.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid., 382.

⁵⁶See also H. Vollmer, “Jealousy in Children,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 16, no. 4 (1944): 187; H. Vollmer, “Hypersymbiosis: Its Effects on Emotional Development,” Paper presented at the 8th International Congress of Pediatrics, Copenhagen, July 23, 1956. Hermann Vollmer Papers, Columbia University Library Special Collections, <https://clio.columbia.edu/catalog/4079441>.

⁵⁷H. Vollmer, “Question That Concern Everybody: Sex and Morality,” By Abram Kardiner. Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, (1955), 266. \$3. By Hermann Vollmer. *New York Times*, January 16, 1955.

originary, and proper site of childcare. Some support for this care is regarded as no bad thing, as for instance when a mother consults a doctor for guidance or a psychoanalyst offers therapy to a child or to a parent. And where a grandmother or governess's caregiving can be treated as merely ancillary, as relays and substitutes,⁵⁸ this can help prop up rather than undermine the apparent inevitability of maternal care. However, where the role of carer has been culturally circumscribed as belonging by nature to the mother, the grandmother always risks being regarded as a disruption to childcare. She is a mother—but not of this child.

Although the grandmother is, in a sense, the bearer of the natural history of the family and of traditional practices, this is not good nature, but nature gone “rotten” over time, hence liable to spoil the child. Vollmer's account would be echoed by later social scientific writing and parental guidance through the 1940s and 1950s. Writing in the same journal as Vollmer a few years later, Strauss argued that “the presence of grandparents in the home has caused delinquency in a considerable number of instances” and that “it is important that when a grandparent interferes with the raising of the child, he or she should be removed from the home.”⁵⁹ Strauss acknowledges, however, that sometimes it is impossible to get the grandparent to leave, and on such occasions, Strauss reports that he has used his authority as a social worker to put the child up for adoption.

Concluding Remarks

The discourse of the spoiling grandmother remains a live one today. Grandparents, but especially the grandmother, are imagined to collude with the excessive and unhealthy appetites of the child, bargaining indulgence for more of the child's love than should rightfully be theirs. The consequences of this indulgence warp the child's subsequent appetites and responses in general and to the child's parents specifically. The “stale” femininity of the grandmother is thereby imagined as posing a risk of contaminating the grandchild, spoiling them. The image appears to be the husk of an old problematization more than an expression of live contemporary concerns: the threat posed by grandparents is not one that generates much excitement but seems more a taken-for-granted stereotype about age and femininity. This husk of a problematization can at times register, but more often, today seems to occlude or trivialize, the key importance of the wider family context for childcare, feeding, and development—and within this the significant role of grandmothers and grandfathers.

We identify four changes of particular significance that have taken some of the fuel from the problematization of grandmaternal care. First, in our society, new family forms are increasingly common, with grandparents living longer and their involvement in care becoming more normal, especially as the ratio of real wages to commercial childcare costs has declined.⁶⁰ For instance, 36 percent of UK families rely primarily on grandparents for childcare.⁶¹ And this figure excludes the 95,000 children who already live with their

⁵⁸On the grandmother as a relay or substitute figure, see J. Derrida, *For What Tomorrow: A Dialogue* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 35.

⁵⁹C. A. Strauss, “Grandma Made Johnny Delinquent,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 13, no. 2 (1943): 343–46, 343.

⁶⁰G. W. Leeson, “Global Demographic Change and Grandparenthood,” *Contemporary Social Science* 13, no. 2 (2018): 145–58; L. Jamieson, E. Ribe, and P. Warner, “Outdated Assumptions about Maternal Grandmothers? Gender and Lineage in Grandparent–Grandchild Relationships,” *Contemporary Social Science* 13, no. 2 (2018): 261–74.

grandparents rather than their parents.⁶² Second, grandfathers have come to play an increased role, and an increasingly recognized role, in childcare and feeding, making the gendered associations historically linked to spoiling discourses increasingly inappropriate and outdated.⁶³ Third, there have been significant changes in the conceptualization of children's mental health and development. Spoiling by the grandmother was originally an important explanatory factor in literature and psychology in accounting for the behavior, mood and eating problems shown by children in the context of the loss or physical or psychological absence of a parent who had been a primary caregiver. However, today, these same behaviors are more frequently attributed to the disrupted relationship with or loss of the parent, not to the grandmother's care that may occur at the same time.⁶⁴ Fourth, the authority of grandmothers is now no contest for that of science in public discourse, so the threat has ebbed, such that polemics such as those of Vollmer and Strauss against grandmothers in the name of scientific rationality seem rather strange and unprovoked today. Rhetorical opposition between masculine science and feminine care is still drawn in medical discourse but is now more widely acknowledged as sexist, offensive, and false than in Vollmer's day.

Already by the 1950s, the image of the spoiling grandmother had become subject to criticism. Cavan argued that the image was stigmatizing, as it implied that the love of grandparents tended toward being bad, in contrast to the love of parents as tending toward being good. She criticized the lack of evidence for this assumption and proposed that we expand our image of "the family" beyond the parents-and-child image privileged by various writers, including the psychoanalytic community.⁶⁵ Building on Cavan's critique, Neugarten and Weinstein argued that positions, such as Vollmer's, that emphasized the grandmother as a problem for children ended up magnetizing social scientific attention to the negative qualities of the grandmother, leaving both the positives and the role of the grandfather unexamined.⁶⁶ These early critiques have been repeated and thoughtfully elaborated by later social scientists, demographers, and cultural researchers. Despite such criticism, the image of grandparental care in cultural circulation today retains qualities from the earlier problematization, with such care too often regarded as of little importance compared to the care provided by parents.

An important contemporary instance is in relation to kinship care, where research reports a consistent picture of isolation, discrimination, and poverty experienced by many grandparents acting as primary caregivers. When children are orphaned or their parents are unable to care for them (for instance, in the context of severe drug dependence), the

⁶¹J. Rutter and B. Evans, *Informal Childcare—Choice or Chance? A Literature Review* (London, UK: Daycare Trust, 2011), http://www.daycaretrust.org.uk/data/files/informal_childcare_march_2011_final.pdf.

⁶²D. Wijedasa, "Children Growing Up in the Care of Relatives in the UK (Policy Report 18, 2017). Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies, University of Bristol. See also K. Hank and I. Buber, "Grandparents Caring for Their Grandchildren: Findings from the 2004 Survey of Health, Ageing, and Retirement in Europe," *Journal of Family Issues* 30, no. 1 (2009): 53–73.

⁶³R. Mann, A. Tarrant, and G. W. Leeson, "Grandfatherhood: Shifting Masculinities in Later Life," *Sociology* 50, no. 3 (2015): 594–610; A. Buchanan and A. Rotkirch, *Grandfathers: Global Perspectives* (London, UK: Springer, 2016).

⁶⁴J. Bowlby, *Child Care and the Growth of Love* (Harmondsworth, UK: Pelican, 1953); D. Riley, *War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother* (London, UK: Virago Press, 1983); M. Thomson, *Lost Freedom: The Landscape of the Child and the British Post-war Settlement* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁶⁵R. S. Cavan, "Family Tensions between the Old and the Middle-aged," *Marriage and Family Living* 18, no. 4 (1956): 323–27.

⁶⁶B. L. Neugarten and K. K. Weinstein, "The Changing American Grandparent," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 26, no. 2 (1964): 199–204.

preferred solution is often for the children to be cared for by relatives. In the United Kingdom (UK), the large majority of such carers are grandparents.⁶⁷ In line with the logic of the supplement described above, in which grandparents are not considered essential to childrearing, in the UK, there are far fewer forms of state support available to grandparents than there are to parents. As a result, 83 percent of these carers saw their income fall as a result of taking on the kinship care role, and 43 percent say their income is not sufficient to meet the children's needs.⁶⁸ In examining the early history of the imaging of the spoiling grandmother, we have sought to understand some of the contributories that originally fed it, supporting the space for other frames of reference in conceptualizing, discussing, and valuing grandparental care. This alternative discourse would be one that both acknowledged grandmothers and grandfathers as important in the care they provide for children, and as themselves requiring appropriate support for this provision of care, rather than taken for granted by the state and society as mere supplements.⁶⁹

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by Wellcome Trust (Grant WT103343MA).

Author biography

Robbie Duschinsky is Senior University Lecturer, Primary Care Unit, University of Cambridge.

Deborah Jacobvitz is Professor in Child Development in the Department of Human Development & Family Sciences, University of Texas at Austin.

Lucy Peake is Chief Executive at Grandparents Plus, a UK charity for grandparents and other family members who are raising a relative's child as kinship carers. She has a PhD in Politics from the University of Southampton and has previously worked in research and policy roles in universities and the voluntary sector.

Serena Messina is a psychologist at the Austin Child Guidance Center, and in private practice. She is also a visiting scholar at the University of Texas in the Human Development and Family Sciences and Educational Psychology departments.

⁶⁷J. Hunt, "Grandparents as Substitute Parents in the UK," *Contemporary Social Science* 13, no. 2 (2019): 175–86.

⁶⁸Grandparents Plus, Kinship Care: State of the Nation 2017, 2017, <https://www.grandparentsplus.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=75a6b874-6666-4224-8770-48905670dbaf>. See also M. F. Taylor, et al. "Understanding the Mental Health Travails of Custodial Grandparents," *Occupational Therapy in Mental Health* 32, no. 3 (2016): 259–80.

⁶⁹Compare S. Gair and I. Zuchowski, "Grandparents Battle to Be Key Stakeholders in Protecting Grandchildren," *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work* 31, no. 1 (2019): 101–13.