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# **Healthy and indulgent food consumption practices within grandparent-grandchild identity bundles: a qualitative study of New Zealand and Danish families**

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## **Abstract**

Both grandparenting and food provisioning practices play an important role in contemporary family life, but the role of food in grandparent-grandchild and wider family relationships is under-researched. Popular and academic discourse often focuses on grandparents as indulgent feeders, with negative implications for children's weight and eating practices. Drawing on the concept of family identity bundles and interviews with Danish and New Zealand grandparents and grandchildren, it was found that, for both generations, being alone together was a treat in itself and a time for treats, although they were fluent in the discourse of balance and moderation.

Grandparents' food-related practices were shaped by the internalized as well as actual presence of the parents, but they tended to experience rather than express tensions over parental feeding practices. These findings offer a nuanced account of grandparents' role in children's (un)healthy eating practices, and of the role of food in intergenerational family relationships.

**Keywords:** healthy eating, treats, food, children, grandparents, family, qualitative interviews.

## **Healthy and indulgent food consumption practices within grandparent-grandchild identity bundles**

As Jackson (2009, p.2) observes, “the relationship between families and food is socially significant, personally engaging, emotionally charged and politically contested”. Thus, food-related practices and meanings in family life have received considerable scholarly attention (DeVault, 1991; McCabe & de Waal Malefyt, 2015), as have the implications for individual, relational and collective family identities (Cappellini et al., 2019; Epp & Price, 2018). Most studies have focused on food practices and meanings within the nuclear family, leaving grandparents’ roles, identities and relationships underexplored (Curtis et al., 2009; Pankhurst et al., 2019; Rogers et al., 2019)). In academic and popular accounts, the discourse is dominated by accounts of overindulgent grandparents providing excessive amounts of unhealthy treats (Roberts and Pettigrew, 2010; Sharry, 2016). Against a backdrop of growing alarm concerning children’s obesity and unhealthy diets (UNICEF, 2019), grandparents have been found to have adverse effects on children’s weight and diet, not least by spoiling them with unhealthy treats, although they may also play a more positive role by cooking ‘proper meals’ from scratch, involving children in food preparation, and teaching them about nutrition (Chambers et al., 2017; Farrow, 2014). Little is known, however, about the social, cultural or relational context of the food grandparents provide for their grandchildren (Curtis et al., 2009; Pankhurst et al., 2019; Rogers et al., 2019). Furthermore, few family food studies incorporate the voices of both grandparents and grandchildren (Chambers et al., 2017).

This paper contributes to knowledge by addressing two inter-related questions. First, what roles do (un)healthy food play in the family “identity bundle” of grandparent-grandchild and grandparent-parent relationships? Second, how do grandparent-grandchild and grandparent-parent identity bundles shape these (un)healthy food provisioning practices? Using family identity theory

and prior research on intergenerational family food studies to address these questions, this study moves beyond the nuclear family living under one roof to explore the role of grandparents in family life and children's eating practices, from the perspective of both grandparents and grandchildren. Following a review of the role that food plays in family identity and relationships and the limited evidence concerning grandparents as food providers, the paper highlights the value of Epp and Price's (2008) family identity framework in illuminating the role of food in grandparent-grandchild and grandparent-parent relationships. It then presents methodological details and findings from an interpretive study exploring food consumption practices within grandparent-grandchild and grandparent-parent identity bundles. The paper concludes by considering implications for families and policy-makers seeking to encourage healthy eating practices among children, and suggesting future research avenues for researching the place of grandparents in family food consumption practices.

## **Theoretical Background**

### ***Food, family relationships and (un)healthy eating***

There is increasing scholarly interest in the meaning and social contexts shaping food practices, not least within family life (Downey & Gudmunson, 2017; Gee & Asim, 2019; Jarrett, Bahar & Kersh, 2016). Much feeding takes place within family settings, and food is deeply bound up with the construction and reconstruction of family roles and relationships and indeed family itself (Cappellini et al., 2019; Coccia & Darling, 2017; DeVault, 1991; Jackson, 2009). Family food consumption is also bound up with contemporary political and moral agendas surrounding the provision of fresh produce and healthy eating choices and practices, not least in relation to global concerns about childhood obesity and the balance of healthy and unhealthy food in children's diets (James & Curtis, 2010; McCabe & de Waal Malefyt, 2015; UNICEF, 2019).

Grandparents play an important role in the lives of many families, in some cases raising grandchildren when parents are absent or unable to look after them (Henderson et al., 2017; Letiecq, Bailey & Kurtz, 2008; Stevenson et al., 2007; Nang et al., 2015), and in others by cohabiting within three-generational households (Goh, 2013; Mutchler & Baker, 2009; Souralová & Zaková, 2019). More commonly, in Western developed economies, as life expectancy increases, average family size decreases, and more mothers work outside the home, grandparents are involved in regular childcare and family leisure time, and have greater opportunities to develop close relationships with grandchildren (Hank & Buber, 2009; Marhánková, 2015; Glaser et al., 2013).

Grandparental involvement in children's lives may shape children's diet and eating practices indirectly, through the food attitudes and practices they transmitted to the middle generation (Moore et al., 2016; Trofholz et al., 2018). More directly, grandparents act as bearers and sharers of food-related family history, recipes and traditions (Curtis et al., 2009) and, when involved in childcare, they provide many meals and snacks (Jongenelis et al., 2019). Grandparents' role in children's diet and eating habits has been under-researched and under-theorised (Chambers et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2016). Reflecting popular media portrayals of grandparents as overindulgent feeders (Sharry, 2016), unhealthy snacks or treats predominate in the limited academic research to date concerning grandparents' feeding practices (Chambers et al., 2017; Roberts and Pettigrew, 2010; Sharry, 2016). A recent US survey found grandparents reporting greater use of food for emotional regulation, less encouragement of energy balance and variety, and less modelling of healthy eating than parents (Eli et al., 2014). There are however some positive accounts of grandparents' influence, for example by having more time than busy parents to cook "proper" meals from scratch, (Eli et al., 2014; Curtis et al., 2009); by varying children's diets with expensive fruit and vegetables that parents might not be able to afford (Pankhurst et al., 2019); by

having a healthier balance of food in the home than parents, and by granting children significantly more autonomy in eating, snacking and choosing food (Farrow, 2014).

Moving beyond the limited evidence on such practices, relatively little is known about the role of food in grandparent identities and relationships (Pankhurst et al., 2019). Drawing on a small-scale qualitative study, Pankhurst et al. suggest that grandparents involved in pre-school childcare not only derived pleasure from children's enjoyment of food treats, but also saw treats as "tools of the trade" enabling them to reward good behaviour, offer comfort, and teach self-control. Clearly, grandparent-grandchild dynamics are not "independent or isolated from other family relationships, but are embedded in a complex family network" (Mahn & Huxhold, 2012, p.238). If indulgent feeding by grandparents is part of the "negotiation of generationally-specific relations" (Curtis et al., 2009), an understanding of grandparents' influence on children's diets and eating practices requires an understanding of complex intergenerational family dynamics. To date, however, there is limited but conflicting evidence on how food-related grandparent-grandchild interactions affect grandparents' relationships with their adult children (Eli et al., 2014; Roberts & Pettigrew 2010). The grandparents interviewed by Pankhurst et al. (2019) claimed consistency and harmony in this regard. They found that parents' and grandparents' feeding patterns were similar, and that grandparents tried to be consistent with their children's rules to maintain harmony. Nonetheless, they had to restrain themselves at times, since they also saw providing treats as a way of differentiating themselves from the parental role. Eli et al. (2016) report on parental compromise and grandparental compliance as a means of achieving "familial homeostasis" or equilibrium. Others have identified differences or tensions between grandparents and parents around children's weight, diet, eating behaviours and table manners (Chambers et al., 2017; Eli et al., 2014; Neely et al., 2014; Pockock et al., 2010). Some grandparents have reported concerns about unhealthy food provided by parents, but more have claimed the right to "spoil", "treat" and "indulge" their

grandchildren, communicating “a sense of fun and creating a closer bond with the child” (Eli et al., 2014, p.31), or even using blatant or sneaky defiance of parents’ healthy eating rules to signal that “time spent with them was more rewarding than time with other adults” (Roberts & Pettigrew, 2010, p.4).

Insightful as these studies are, the dominance of parental voices in prior studies is striking. Children also use food to foster and manage relationships, demonstrate agency, and express emotions (Neely et al., 2014), and while some studies have incorporated children’s as well as parents’ accounts (Curtis et al, 2009; Roberts & Pettigrew, 2010), or grandparental views (Eli et al., 2014, 2016; Pankhurst et al., 2019; Rogers et al., 2019), the literature to date offers little insight into how grandparents and grandchildren understand, let alone co-create their relationship through food. The significance of this research gap is highlighted by family identity theory, which addresses the importance of family identity bundles to the “doing” of family (Epp & Price, 2008; Cappellini et al., 2019).

### ***Family identity theory as a lens on food practices in grandparent-grandchild relationships.***

Epp and Price’s (2008) family identity framework offers a valuable lens for exploring the place of food and food-related practices beyond as well as within individual family households. Their framework views family members as drawing on marketplace resources as they engage in the complex collective enterprise of being a family. The complexity of this enterprise is due in no small part to the multiple, constantly changing and inter-related identities at play: each family contains many different and overlapping “identity bundles”, which include “the family’s collective identity, smaller groups’ (e.g. siblings, couples, parent-child) relational identities, and individual family members’ identities” (Epp & Price, 2008, p.50). Furthermore, each ‘we’ may draw on marketplace resources, including food, in performing its own identity and interacting with other family identity

bundles through routines and rituals, shared stories, intergenerational transfers and the “social dramas” that ensue when consumption-related family norms are violated. Epp and Price’s (2008) family identity framework highlights the complex, overlapping and shifting relationships at play in family food consumption practices. Specifically, it suggests that what and how grandparents feed their grandchildren may be bound up with particular grandparent-grandchild identity bundles, which are themselves embedded in wider family networks and interacting with grandparent-parent identity bundles. Grandparent-grandchild relationships are mentioned only briefly by Epp and Price (2008), and do not feature at all in Epp and Price’s (2018) discussion of how feeding the family is affected by changes in home life and the organization of care. Other studies of family identity and food consumption have focused on nuclear family dynamics (Cappellini & Parsons, 2012; McCabe & de Waal Malefyt, 2015), with only fleeting references to grandparents and grandchildren (e.g. Chitakunye & Maclaran, 2012; Mosio et al., 2004). Pankhurst et al. (2019) offer welcome insights into the grandparental meanings and identities involved in providing food treats, but their small-scale study addresses only the grandparents’ perspective, in the context of providing regular childcare to pre-school children.

Overall, little is known about “the inter-generational interactions that take place directly between children and grandparents” around food (Curtis et al., 2009, p. 90), or how these are embedded in wider family practices and relationships. This paper, therefore, aims to understand the food consumption practices involved in grandparent-grandchild identity bundles, both when they are alone together and interacting with other family members. Furthermore, it seeks to explore these experiences by listening to the voices of grandparents and their grandchildren.



## Methodology

This paper draws on a broader study which explored grandparent-grandchild relationships and experiences of spending mundane and special times together, including the role of food in their interactions. An interpretive approach is appropriate for studies seeking to understand the complex world of lived experience, not least in relation to family life and family food practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Neely et al., 2014; Suralová & Záková, 2019). This study, then, explored these issues through qualitative interviews with grandparents and grandchildren. The study was conducted in Denmark and New Zealand. As Epp and Price (2018) argue, shifting macro-social structures have implications for the work of feeding the family. Although Denmark and New Zealand are both small, relatively affluent countries with average life expectancy allowing the grandparenting role to extend over decades<sup>1</sup>, greater state provision of childcare in Denmark means that more than 99% of Danish children receive formal childcare (OECD, 2016), whereas 25% of New Zealand children rely on grandparents for regular childcare (Stats New Zealand, 2017). Thus, New Zealand grandparents are more likely to be involved in routine, regular feeding of grandchildren than their Danish counterparts.

Fieldwork was undertaken in 2016-17, with 40 participants interviewed across 18 families. Recruitment took place in broadly middle-class neighbourhoods in Auckland, New Zealand and around Aalborg, Denmark, based on snowball sampling from personal contacts, an approach to senior sport clubs, posters in public places and posts on local community Facebook groups. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate in pursuit of insight and in-depth understanding (Rhodes et al., 2016), with families required to have at least one grandparent spending time with at least one dependent grandchild on a regular basis.

In order to capture a range of food-related experiences and relationships over the lifecourse, no age-limit was specified for either grandparents or grandchildren, although in practice the grandmother of a child under three thought her granddaughter was too young to take part. Both grandmothers and grandfathers within each family were invited to participate where possible, along with one or two of their grandchildren. Participant details are provided in Tables 1 and 2. All those agreeing to take part were White. Participating grandparents ranged in age from 56-82, and participating grandchildren from 6-28, with most aged 8-13. Institutional constraints meant fewer families and a narrower grandchild age-range was included in the New Zealand sample.

*Tables 1 and 2: Participants and family circumstances (About here)*

Although participation was sought from both generations, in four cases grandchildren could not be interviewed because they were considered too young or lived too far away to join in the interview, or because of intergenerational sensitivities around an ongoing divorce. In two cases, only a grandchild was available for interview. In spite of these limitations, the sample allowed a range of food-related grandparent-grandchild relationships to be explored, reflecting the value of small-scale qualitative studies in offering insights into under-researched areas of family life (Poria & Timothy, 2014). Ethical approval was granted by the relevant academic institutions. All participating grandparents and grandchildren gave their consent, and parents also consented to their children's participation.

Consistent with previous studies exploring family meals, food practices and social relationships (Trofholz et al., 2018), semi-structured interviews were used to address key areas while maintaining the flexibility to follow unexpected avenues (Rhodes et al., 2016). Taking place in grandparents' homes in order to create a comfortable, informal atmosphere, interviews were undertaken by two authors and a research assistant. The interview guidewas developed by all

members of the research team, with each member experienced in qualitative family research. Interviews began with open-ended questions about grandparent-grandchild relationships and how they spent time together. Guided by Morgan's (1996) influential account of family practices, interviews then explored routines, discourses, meanings and emotions associated with food on everyday and special occasions. Interview questions were adapted to each generation and follow up questions were asked to provide more detail on experiences. Grandparents were encouraged to discuss feeding of grandchildren, for example: Do you cook different things to eat when your grandchildren are here? What do they eat? Do you agree with your own children on what the grandchildren should eat? Are there any conflicts with the middle generation? Do you buy food, bake, cook or eat out together? Grandchildren were asked questions such as: What do you eat when you are with your grandparents? Is this the same as at home? Do you cook together? Beyond such direct questions about food, conversations about joint trips out and everyday togetherness offered further insights into grandparent/grandchild food practices.

Individual and joint understandings of family practices were sought by interviewing grandparents (average length of interviews 60 minutes), then grandchild/grandchildren (average 26 minutes), and finally both together (average 22 minutes). Interviewing grandparents and grandchildren separately allowed their different voices and perspectives to be heard on the 'doing' of their relationship, and the joint interview allowed them to show as well as tell by co-constructing accounts of their practices and relationships.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and preliminary data analysis began with the first interviews. Once the New Zealand interviews were transcribed, this material was analysed by the authors independently. The three first authors were the main drivers of the data analysis and development of themes, although all authors participated by offering initial and subsequent comments on transcripts and drafts. Drawing on the approach taken by Kremer-Sadlik et

al. (2008) to manage the linguistic challenges of a cross-cultural dataset, one author then undertook a full analysis of the Danish data. While this is clearly a limitation, detailed summaries and verbatim translations of key material were shared with the rest of the team, and further verbatim translations of Danish transcripts were provided as emergent themes were pursued. Open coding was undertaken initially, tracking broad emerging themes and offering early conceptualisation of findings (Gioia et al., 2012). Initial iterations of the analysis focused on the data themselves, with subsequent rounds using the literature to challenge and develop themes and explore similarities and differences between grandparent and grandchild experiences and accounts. In presenting the findings, data have been anonymized, with pseudonyms used below.

## **Findings**

Consistent with recent surveys (OECD, 2016; StatsNZ, 2010), more New Zealand (NZ) grandparents and grandchildren spent extended time together on ‘school days’ while parents were working, but some Danish grandparents and grandchildren also spent a considerable amount of time together. The key differences encountered between the two national contexts related to what was cooked and served; regardless of the structural differences in childcare provision, grandparent-grandchild and grandparent-parent identity bundles and their relationship to (un)healthy food were strikingly similar. Therefore the discussion below is not organized as a cross-cultural comparison. In both countries, grandparents and grandchildren described both everyday and more “special” times together such as sleepovers, celebrations and holidays. Frequency of contact did not emerge, however, as a factor influencing the balance of healthy and unhealthy food provided to grandchildren. Some of these times were spent alone together, and sometimes other family members were involved. Food appeared to play a prominent part in these different kinds of togetherness, as discussed below.

### *Time alone together as a treat – and a time for treats*

Across the individual and joint interviews, occasions when grandparents and grandchildren were alone together, independent of the middle generation, were described as offering precious “family time” (Daly, 1996) with food rituals, routines and rules that differed from family time shared by children and parents. Time alone together not only cultivated the grandparent/grandchild identity bundle, but also appeared to be understood as *a treat in itself, a time for treats*, and an opportunity to *reward good behaviour with treats*. For the NZ grandparents, especially in the early years, regular childcare was seen as contributing to the “special bond” between them. Thus, Hannah, NZ grandmother, declined invitations from friends while she was looking after her toddler granddaughter, because “when I’m with her, my time is just with her”. Jane, NZ grandmother, spoke fondly of the time when three grandchildren lived near enough for her to provide afterschool care:

*I loved that phase, I just loved it, because we really felt close to them ... would get them after school, come home, have a cup of tea or a drink of milk and have a chat.*

Time spent alone together also seemed precious to grandchildren. For NZ grandchild Julia, 11, being in her grandparents’ house felt very different from being at home:

*It just sort of feels more warm here. There’s lots of love here. The sea breeze – it just sort of calms all of us down, and we all take a moment to breathe in. And watch television together, and have some snacks together.*

Julia’s evocative comment highlights the distinctive, precious family time to be had with her grandparents and indicates how food is part of their routine and togetherness. The role of food was also highlighted when she and her grandparents were asked what they did together:

*Elizabeth (grandmother): We eat.*

*Dennis (grandfather): Have a barbecue. Sometimes a picnic during the summer.*

*Julia (grandchild, 11): Get some ice-cream sometimes for a treat.*

*Elizabeth: When you were littler, we used to bake and sew and ...*

*Julia: We still do a bit of baking.*

The food practices described here are fun and special: the informality of barbecues and picnics, the tradition of baking together, and the “treat” of going for ice-cream all suggest that Julia’s visits are cherished, special occasions. Similarly, NZ grandchildren Rosie, 7, and Emma, 10, differentiated between the continuous time spent with parents and the few months of the year when their grandparents, John and Margaret, came over from the UK:

*Rosie (granddaughter, 7): Well, they treat us more.*

*Interviewer: In what ways do they treat you?*

*Emma (granddaughter, 10): Well, like, they give us lots of presents.*

*Rosie: We get a lot of ice-creams*

*Emma: And we get ice-creams.*

Thus, some of children’s enjoyment of time alone with grandparents could be related to being the centre of attention and being “spoiled” with treats. Several children also suggested that there was less tension with grandparents “because you don’t see them all the time”, making it easier to sustain good behaviour than when with their parents, who had more time with them to “see how naughty you are”. This could create a virtuous (if less healthy) circle, in that good behaviour made it easier for grandparents to provide treats as a reward (Pankhurst et al, 2019), or at least gave them less reason to withhold them.

Treats were also an important part of grandparent-grandchild togetherness in Denmark. Tine, Danish grandmother, always brings her 8 year-old grandson Sander a small gift, such as “sweets in a small bag or wrapped in paper, the ones he really likes”, while Kristina, Danish grandmother, uses sweets to coax her grandchildren into joining her on a bike ride. She notes that it works surprisingly well to say

*“Why don’t we go for a bike ride to [supermarket]? And I’ll pay, and you’ll get some money, and then you can buy some sweets?”.*

The notion of a special kind of family time with its own food rules as well as routines and rituals emerged clearly from the study. Across the sample, grandparents talked about stocking up with “treatie-type things” when grandchildren were due to visit. Now 28, Danish grandchild Wilma

remembers how sleepovers with her grandmother were always special as they involved ‘Guldkorn’, a sugary cereal, which was never allowed at home. Similarly Danish grandson Esben, 8, reports that he gets more sweets at his grandparents’ house, “even when it is not the weekend”. Grandparents also took pleasure in breaking or stretching rules. NZ grandmother Jane relished school holiday visits from her grandchildren who had moved away. She took every opportunity to strengthen their relationship, not least through food and some subversion of parental rules (Roberts & Pettigrew, 2010; Curtis et al., 2009).

*Jane (grandmother): Well, it’s just re-establishing close contact, yes, without the parents around. Just chatting to them, and doing things together.*

*Interviewer: Does it make a difference that the parents aren’t there?*

*Jane: Yes*

*Interviewer: In what ways?*

*Jane: I think you’re more relaxed about what you say to them and what you let them do, and what you let them eat – a very big one [laughs]!*

It was not just grandmothers who behaved in this way; Danish grandfather Eigil argues that “as a grandparent you can allow yourself to serve a pizza. We’ve done that many times. That’s no big deal”. Despite framing this as “no big deal”, he takes pleasure in noting how much his grandchildren loved their “more tolerant” approach to healthy eating. Furthermore, his use of the phrase “as a grandparent” here highlights how food is bound up with what Curtis et al. (2009) term the “negotiation of generationally-specific relations”. Thus, it seems that both grandparents and grandchildren have opportunities to bond over their complicity in the “social drama” (Epp & Price, 2008) of violating parental norms around healthy eating. Indeed, indulgence appeared to play a part in grandparental identities as well as relationships. Intergenerational identities as well as relationships were being negotiated through treats. For example, it mattered to NZ grandmother Sheila that her fridge was well-stocked when her grandson visited:

*Sven (grandson, 11, not interviewed) will come around with his school friends and he’ll say ... he’s already told them there’s lots of good things ... They call me M..., in M...’s fridge, and I’ve just got to have them ‘cos there’s a whole lot of reputation hanging on that fact, for me and for Sven. So they just come in and I’ve always got naughty things in there.*

Having a constant supply of snacks that Sven and his friends see as “good” but she knows are “naughty” allows Sheila to bask in his reflected glory and live up to Sven’s image of her as an indulgent grandmother. This highlights the limits of nutritional knowledge alone in fostering healthy eating: grandparents, like the parents in Hughner and Maher’s (2006) study, may be concerned about the social as much as the nutritional value of the food they provide for children.

As Epp and Price (2008) observe, family life unfolds beyond the household, and this was certainly the case for grandparents feeding grandchildren. In some cases, going out for a meal with children was simply easier than cooking for them, as was the case with Danish grandmother Ragnhild, one of the oldest participants. There were however many stories of enjoying treats and snacks in cafes when out and about together, or even stopping for an ice-cream on the way home from school. The extent to which treats had become embedded in grandparent/grandchild regular routines and relationships is indicated by NZ grandmother Hannah’s account of her toddler granddaughter:

*She (granddaughter, aged two and a half) knows about cafes. And so when we come in on the train, she automatically assumes we’ll go to a café.*

Eating out was in some cases treasured as a ritual providing particular bonding opportunities. NZ grandmother Anne notes that for her granddaughter Iris, 12, “going out to eat is very important, that’s a big treat”. Iris herself reports that “Me and Granny’s favourite place is D----, it’s got really nice food”. According a cafe they had visited twice the status of “me and Granny’s favourite place” suggests that elevating a shared consumption experience and expressing a shared preference is an important way for Iris to enact the grandparent-grandchild identity bundle. NZ grandmother Elizabeth mentioned that she and her husband Dennis took their grandchildren out for an Indian meal on special occasions, “but that’s not a regular thing, it will be a birthday, a treat, a real treat”. Elizabeth’s distinction between “a treat” and a “real treat” suggests a normalization of the treat, as



does the reference by some of Eli et al.'s (2016) participants to 'special special occasions'. In this sense, the treats commonly discussed by grandparents and grandchildren – like ice-cream, sweets, cakes, pizza - appear to have moved, in Epp and Price's (2008) terms, from a family ritual to an everyday interaction.

### *Balance and moderation.*

Alongside rituals and everyday interactions, Epp and Price (2008) see consumption narratives as contributing to family identity bundles. So far, the food practices described reinforce what NZ grandfather Dennis refers to as "the old story: spoil them rotten and send them back". This resonates with the somewhat tainted image of grandparents as harming grandchildren's diets and subverting parents' healthy eating agendas. Alongside that old story, however, were other accounts suggesting a more nuanced and measured approach to food within this family identity bundle. Like some of the children interviewed by Curtis et al. (2009) and in line with Pankhurst et al.'s, (2019) and Rogers et al.'s, (2019) findings among grandparents, many grandparents and grandchildren in this study seemed keen to highlight that spoiling, and unhealthy food consumption, were undertaken in moderation and thus only part of their shared story. Danish grandchild Sander, 8, explains that when staying for the weekend at his grandmother's place, he sometimes get two shortcrust pastries with raspberry jam (hindbærnsnitter). He is not allowed to eat both at once, however, but has to make them last for the whole weekend. His grandmother, Tine, also explains that if Sander has just had pancakes at home he might not get a treat straight away from her. NZ grandchild Julia, 11, contrasts the limited breakfast options at home with the choice of cereal and fruit at her grandparents' house. She is at pains to stress, however, the boundaries that cannot be crossed:

*Whatever you want for breakfast, except for ice-cream and chocolate. That is not included for breakfast.*

NZ grandchild Mia, 10, describes how, after having toasted sandwiches for lunch, “we have like mini-Magnums, and then we will have like an apple”. Highlighting the smaller portion size of the ice-cream, and consumption of fresh fruit, again paints a picture of balance and moderation. Mia’s grandmother, Jane, described changing what she provides in support of healthier diets:

*We used to dish out chocolate biscuits, but that’s not – they have one sometimes but I try to have something else.*

When talking about treats, both grandparents and grandchildren referred to spoiling “a little bit but not too much”, suggesting that while spoiling may be fun, a spoiled child is not. NZ grandchild Iris, 11, watches her words when asked about eating with her grandparents:

*I normally get quite like – not spoiled, but I get a treat when I’m out with them. So we pick something off the menu for lunch or something ... We can probably go wherever we wanted, as long as it wasn’t mega-expensive, but they’d probably even let us go to McDonalds if we wanted to.*

She goes on to extol the virtues of the chicken salad and toasted chicken sandwich that she had eaten at “me and Granny’s favourite place”, and explains how she chooses what to drink when out with her grandparents:

*Well, it just kind of depends. Say we’re just going for a quick snack, she’ll get me a proper drink. Maybe like a milkshake or something like that. But if we’re already getting lunch I just kind of have water, ‘cos they’re already buying me a lunch.*

Family practices are often imbued with “personal or moral significance” (Morgan, 1996). In this account, Iris plays the role of the “good child” (Gram & Grønhøj, 2016) and demonstrates that caring is mutual and multidirectional (Souralová & Zaková, 2019): much as she likes being given treats, she does not want to abuse her grandparents’ generosity: thus she would not propose eating anywhere “mega-expensive”, and she balances out the cost of a drink with what else her grandparents have bought for her. This highlights an important dimension of the grandparent-grandchild identity bundle: in Epp and Price’s (2008) terms, Iris shows member commitment, navigating a moral space where her grandparents’ resources are not infinite.

*“Proper meals” and vegetables.*

Although there were various references to grandparents preparing snacks such as toasties, sandwiches, and smoothies, “proper meals” – what NZ grandmother Jane called “full scale dinner, meat and veggies” - also had a role to play within this identity bundle. Julia, 11, mentions how her NZ grandmother “normally makes different meals each time we come”, and NZ grandmother Hannah talks about preparing “good” and “simple” food like mashed potato and sausages for her granddaughter, ensuring that she has “good protein intake” and healthy options. It was important to her that she normalised healthy eating habits, believing that “if they grow up always having broccoli for example it’s not a big issue”. There was agreement between both generations that grandparents generally had more time for cooking meals from scratch, whereas dinner provided at home by busy parents was often “functional” or came straight from the freezer. Farrow (2014) found grandparents could foster a healthier nutritional environment for children by giving them more control over their food choices and intake, and this seemed the case here at least some of the time. Almost all grandparents are keen to provide meals that their grandchildren like to eat, and took pride in their grandchildren’s enjoyment of their “special” dishes. For example, NZ grandmother Jane attempts to “suss out what’s popular at the moment” and is delighted by her granddaughters’ insistence that when they visit, “we have to have your scrambled eggs, Grandma”. Similarly, Danish grandmother Katrine mentions that her grandchildren like what she calls ‘old-fashioned food’, meatballs (frikadeller), meatballs in curry (boller i karry) or meat loaf (forloren hare): “It’s granny’s old dishes – they like those. That’s what they don’t get at home”. Her grandson, Anders, 15, highlights her efforts to provide food that he and his siblings enjoyed:

*Back in the day when we slept at her place on school nights, sometimes she asked what we want in our packed lunch and what we like, and then she would shop for it even if we only have to be there maybe one night (Anders, 15).*

Danish grandmother Joan explains that it is “not fun cooking a lot that nobody wants to eat”. She makes meals with potatoes for herself and her husband, and pasta for the grandchildren, and notes that these different tastes had become an intergenerational joke: her granddaughters called them “the potato grandparents” and in return they were called “the pasta grandchildren”. Again, however, there was a balance to be struck in food provision: accommodating children’s meal preferences did not mean letting them avoid healthy foods. Rather than forcing the issue, however, it seemed that grandparents found more subtle and effective ways of encouraging vegetable consumption. For example, although NZ grandmother Sheila stocked her fridge with “naughty things” for Sven, 11, and his friends, she had also developed strategies tailored to each grandchild to ensure that they ate their vegetables:

*Bella [granddaughter, 9, not interviewed] will eat anything, as long as it’s broccoli with cheese on it ... Sven, just give him little portions, he will be alright.*

As well as encouraging healthier and more adventurous eating choices, grandparents – particularly grandmothers – talked about shopping for and preparing food with their grandchildren. Cooking and baking were valued for the togetherness involved as well as the food produced. These activities also allowed grandparents to share their own histories, with a story from NZ granddaughter Mia, 10, exemplifying the intergenerational transfers discussed by Epp and Price (2008):

*Yeah, we bake a lot and it’s so much fun, ‘cos she has this old book of like recipes from her mother when she was like 60 years old, so it’s like really cool and they have really nice recipes.*

Family food practices connect generations, linking individuals to their history (Morgan, 1996; Curtis et al., 2009) and strengthening relationships (Neely et al., 2014). Thus, regardless of the nutritional value of what was made, cooking and baking with grandchildren allowed grandparents not only to pass on skills, but also to weave their grandchildren into the wider family network, not least as it extended over time.

### *Food-related interactions between family identity bundles*

Family identity is dynamic and complex, as different family identity bundles constantly evolve, overlap and interact with each other (Epp & Price, 2008). In this study, the actual or even imagined presence of the middle generation altered food-related family dynamics, though this was something identified by the grandparents rather than the grandchildren.

### *Navigating the internalized parental presence.*

Even when not physical present, parents, and grandparent-parent relationships cast a long shadow over grandparents' food-related interactions with their grandchildren. In some cases, grandparents explicitly deferred to parental preferences and practices. For example, when food shopping with their NZ grandchildren, John and Margaret would ask what their parents would usually buy.

Parental rules around healthy eating loomed large, as alluded to in NZ grandmother Jane's account of reducing the quantity of chocolate biscuits given to her grandchildren:

*Interviewer: Are there strict rules when it comes to food normally, with the parents?*

*Jane: Not particularly [...] but now it's sugar of course and you have to not give them a chocolate biscuit. I do, but...*

*Interviewer: But it's more relaxed than when you're just you and the grandchildren?*

*Jane: Yes... Much more so.*

Clearly, NZ grandmother Jane bends the parents' rules when they are not around, in order to indulge her grandchildren. At the same time she acknowledges that these rules are not unreasonable. Jane resolves this tension by continuing to offer the biscuits, but less often, and, as discussed above, she balances the treats by also providing fresh fruit. A sense of mild subversion – highlighted by the qualifiers “occasionally” and “for a treat” - is also evident in this account of eating out:

*Margaret (grandmother): We're banned from taking them to McDonalds too often.*

*John (grandfather): But we do, for a treat.*

*Margaret: Occasionally, yes. They love it.*

Believing that her daughter is overprotective and somewhat on edge in dealing with her grandchildren, Danish grandmother Kristina sometimes brings her grandchildren to an aqua park and treats them to French fries:

*And they [the grandchildren] just thought it was fun to eat French fries. They obviously never get something like that [laughs].*

Conscious that she is overstepping her daughter's rules, Kristina realizes that this has potential to create tension, but grandparents generally seemed to see such actions as minor, benign, and unlikely to create social dramas in their dealings with parents. There was little discussion from either generation about what parents were told about such infractions, perhaps suggesting that grandchildren were not only expected to navigate confidently between different sets of rules, but also to be complicit in grandparents' subversion by keeping this secret.

Grandparents also drew on narratives of balance and moderation to bolster grandparent-parent identity bundles by highlighting shared understandings. For example, Danish grandmother Janne knows that her daughter wants to limit her granddaughter's sugar intake, and will sometimes bring her granddaughter fruit instead of sweets. Reflecting on her intergenerational positioning (Curtis et al., 2009), she remembers being at the other end of grandparent-parent interactions, and how much she disliked being overruled by her mother-in-law. Thus, Janne finds her own balance in nutritional as well as intergenerational terms: "I'm not over-indulging her [granddaughter] when it is not a special occasion". The internalized parent was not always presented as encouraging children's healthy eating. NZ grandmother Hannah, for example, tried to compensate for what she saw as a less healthy approach to food within her granddaughter's home, without offending her daughter or her son-in-law's family. She encouraged her toddler granddaughter to eat broccoli with olive oil, and was pleased to see her enjoy hummus, cheese and olives, but

*...she's also got a bit of a sweet tooth. I'm a little bit wary about that. But I can only do so much 'cos I'm her grandparent. But I try not... I wouldn't have lollies around or things like that.*

Danish grandparents Kristina and Peter believe that they were more successful than the parents in feeding their grandchildren vegetables, because their approach is more leisurely and fun. When the children are at her home, Kristina makes a 'snack bowl' with different types of vegetables, and the children enjoy eating these bowls of "more varied and fun things". Similarly, NZ grandmother Sheila was proud that the approach she had tailored to each grandchild meant that they tended to eat more vegetables for her than for their parents. Such stories highlight how grandparents brought healthy and unhealthy elements into their grandchildren's diets and eating habits. They also show how these practices are underpinned by complex, dynamic interactions within and between family identity bundles, even when other family members are not physically present.

*Navigating relationships in the physical presence of parents.*

With food so central to family life, it often brought grandparents and grandchildren together with parents. The tensions of grandparenting are well documented, especially the competing norms of "being there" for the family, without interfering (Mason et al, 2007), and the grandparents in this study highlighted the challenges of maintaining familial homeostasis or intergenerational equilibrium (Eli et al., 2016) around food. As discussed earlier, neither grandparents nor grandchildren mentioned social dramas arising over violation of parental rules around treats. It may be that parents were not always aware of these violations, or perhaps that a degree of compromise had been reached over time. In any case, within this study, the tensions that tended to be discussed arose when the three generations were eating together, particularly around family meals. Even here, however, grandparents went to considerable effort to avoid social dramas. Grandparents sometimes

expressed frustration at parental practices around the dinner table, particularly those causing conflict or showing inconsistency. As NZ grandmother Sheila notes:

*Their parents say things like – You must eat that. And then five minutes later the child's got down from the table and that's [the vegetables] still there, that sort of thing... And I suppose like not eating before dinner, but they're allowed to just eat all the time.*

Similarly, although she would not challenge them directly, NZ grandmother Elizabeth was not impressed when the parents forced her grandchildren to eat up their vegetables rather than using the more subtle and playful ways of encouraging them that she favoured. Maintaining familial homeostasis was crucial, even if this required “biting one’s tongue” as one grandmother put it. Danish grandmother Joan believes in respecting the rules at her children’s house but finds this challenging, since:

*We are stricter than they are. Søren and I are more into saying ‘you should finish that plate before you get something else’.*

Danish grandmother Katrine thinks one of her grandsons, 6 (not interviewed), is given too much rice and pasta because he does not like potatoes, whereas she sees potatoes as healthier and also part of Danish culture. At her place she serves him potatoes and succeeds in making him eat it, but would never interfere at her children’s house. Some grandparents would be more flexible than parents in responding to children’s dislikes; Danish grandmother Tine would prefer to offer her grandson, 8, a sandwich if he did not want what was being served, while Kristina would make a fish cake “because one of them is not crazy about salmon”. Finally Danish grandmother Janne is appalled that the children are allowed to have an iPad on the breakfast table in the morning, and horrified by her daughter-in-law sitting at the table with the children, engrossed in her phone. The strain of biting her tongue to avoid turning what she sees as significant violations of table etiquette into a social drama is palatable in her account:



*I just sat at the table. I thought 'I'm not interfering'. I... I... and I am not! Even though I want to say something.*

## **Conclusions**

For better or for worse, food fuels family identities and relationships (James & Curtis, 2009).

Although much work on feeding the family has examined the role of the parent, particularly the mother (De Vault, 1991; Cappellini & Parsons, 2012; McCabe & de Waal Malefyt, 2015), grandparents are increasingly involved in childcare and thus in food provision (Chambers et al., 2017). Although there is some evidence and much concern about grandparents' overly indulgent feeding practices, relatively little is known about how grandparent-grandchild relationships are bound up with food consumption (Curtis et al., 2009).

This paper builds on and extends Epp and Price's (2008) family identity framework by exploring grandparent-grandchild relationships and food practices in New Zealand and Danish families, extending previous work by exploring the experiences of both grandparents and their grandchildren. Through the lens of family identity bundles, the findings highlight the significant, complex and sometimes contradictory role of grandparents in feeding children and shaping their relationship with healthy and unhealthy eating. The grandparents in this study reported considerable involvement in their grandchildren's lives. Time spent alone together, without parents, was described by grandparents and grandchildren alike as a treat in itself, and time for a "treatie-type of food". At the same time, both grandparents and grandchildren were fluent in the discourse of balance and moderation, insisting that there were boundaries to indulgence. Grandparents talked about encouraging consumption of fruit, vegetables and "proper meals", and limiting intake of unhealthy food (Rogers et al., 2019), while grandchildren reported eating "proper meals" as well as ice-cream. Despite being well-versed in the discourse of balance and moderation, treats and snacks still seemed

to play a significant role in their food practices. If being alone together is special and celebrated, yet occurs regularly, the “occasional treat” may become the rule rather than the exception. Thus, the discourse of balance and moderation could be a culinary Trojan horse, allowing “occasional treats” to slip unnoticed into everyday practice and routines. The grandparent/grandchild identity bundle did not exist in a vacuum, but was embedded in other family relationships. Thus, cooking and baking together allowed grandparents to pass on family and cultural traditions and recipes, and perhaps shape how they would be remembered by their grandchildren in future. Parents also loomed large in grandparent-grandchild interactions around food, particularly in grandparents’ accounts. The shadow of the parents, especially in the form of healthy eating rules, was significant even when grandparents and grandchildren were alone together, or when those rules were stretched. When parents were physically present, especially at mealtimes, different values as well as different generations came into contact with each other, with different views concerning *how* children should eat as much as *what* they should eat. This created the conditions for social dramas (Epp & Price, 2008), but grandparents tended to bite their tongue in order to maintain family harmony or homeostasis (Eli et al., 2016).

The data from Denmark and New Zealand showed more similarities than differences, suggesting that intergenerational family relations around food and dilemmas of healthy versus unhealthy eating cross international boundaries. Nonetheless it should be acknowledged that this qualitative study is based on a sample of 40 middle-class White participants who did not report especially challenging family dynamics nor appeared to struggle with weight issues. Grandparent-grandchild interactions, including those revolving around food, are likely to be affected by a host of factors, including age, socio-demographic circumstances, weight levels, divorce or remarriage, ethnic and cultural context, values and orientations around sexuality (Eli et al, 2014; Goh, 2013; Henderson et al., 2017; Kemp, 2007; Jongenelis et al., 2019; Scherrer, 2014). Food-related interactions and meanings between

grandparents and grandchildren, within the context of wider family relationships, merit detailed attention in such varied settings. Although this study is distinctive in incorporating the voices of grandparents and their grandchildren, future studies could seek the participation of a wider range of family members, such as the middle generation or “other” grandparents within a family network. Finally, while this study offers insights grandparent-grandchild relationships across a wide range of ages, future research could fruitfully explore those relationships at particular stages in the lifecourse.

Although it is not possible to generalise from small-scale qualitative studies such as this, the findings may give families and policy-makers some pause for thought. It is notable, for example, that this relatively privileged group of grandparents, with the resources and knowledge to support healthy diets, still struggled to strike the right balance between indulgence and health in feeding their grandchildren. This highlights the wealth of other factors at play when grandparents feed their grandchildren, including the relationships and social identities at stake and displayed to others (Hughner & Maher, 2006; James & Curtis, 2010). The study also highlights the risks of grandparent-grandchild discourse around balance and moderation becoming a Trojan horse, blinding grandparents in particular to the shifting of high-fat, salty, and sugary food from occasional treats to everyday tokens in their intergenerational exchanges. More positively, given grandparents’ increasing involvement in childcare and food provision, they could be included in the target audience for family healthy eating campaigns, starting with the pregnancy of daughters/daughters-in-law. As children grow, grandparents could be encouraged to support children’s diet by introducing a greater variety of healthy vegetables and alternative treats. Campaigns could also remind grandparents – and grandchildren - that treats do not have to be edible, and grandparents can pass on skills and build their legacy through many other shared activities. Precious time together could also involve shopping for, baking and cooking healthy food, with cookbooks or recipe leaflets

designed for grandparents and grandchildren to follow together, so that grandparent-grandchild relationship nurtures children's physical health as well as their social wellbeing.

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**Table 1: New Zealand participants and family circumstances**

Family	Grandmother	Grandfather	Grandchild	Geographical distance	Frequency of contact
NZ 1	Anne (75) (retired)	Divorcee	Iris (12)	Walking distance	Daily to weekly
NZ 2	Margaret (73) (retired)	John (74) (retired)	Emma (10) Rosie (7)	Grandparents live in the UK	Annual extended holiday
NZ 3	Jane (82) (retired)	Widow – remarried	Mia (10) Nathalie (6)	Walking distance	Weekly
NZ 4	Dawn (“60s”) (left work to help with childcare)	Paul (“70s”)	Michael (11) Caroline(9)	Walking distance	Daily
NZ 5	Elizabeth (69) (retired)	Dennis (68) (working)	Julia (11)	20 km apart	Weekly to monthly
NZ 6	Sheila (66) (working)	Divorcee, not living with partner		within 5 km	Daily to weekly
NZ 7	Hannah (64) (working part-time)	Married, husband (working)		20 km apart	Weekly

**Table 2: Danish participants and family circumstances**

Family	Grandmother	Grandfather	Grandchild	Geographical distance	Frequency of contact
DK 1	Janne (56) (works reduced hours)	Partner (age unknown)		International	1-2 a year
DK 2	Stinne (65) (retired)	Gert (65) (retired)	Josefine(13)	20 km	Almost daily
DK 3	Tine (61) (working)		Sander (8)	20 km	Weekly
DK 4	Kristina (59) (working)	Peter (57) (working)		400 km	Every month
DK 5	Inge (71) (retired)	Egil (63) (working)	Louise (8)	25 km apart	Weekly
DK 6	Joan (66) (retired)	Partner (age unknown)	Karen (17)	30 km	Every month
DK 7	Katrine (72) (retired)		Anders (15)	2-3 km	Weekly



DK 8	Lisbeth (69) (retired)	Henrik (63) (retired)	Mads (13)	30 km	Weekly
DK 9	Ragnhild (80) (retired)	(widowed)	Wilma (28)	Live in same city	Weekly
DK 10	No grandparents interviewed		Carl (8)	unknown	Unknown
DK 11	No grandparents interviewed		Esben (8)	Live in same town, or GP 3 hours away	Unknown

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/>