

Chapter 2

Becoming a Grandparent—On Transitions and Transformations

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Abstract The transition to grandparenthood brings with it a shift in status, roles, and identities, and is perceived by grandparents themselves as one of the most meaningful and emotional events in their lives. Nevertheless, it has only recently become the subject of comprehensive research. This chapter offers a wide view of grandparenthood from the perspective of the life cycle and other transitions, surveying various factors that shape the experience of the role, including age, gender, lineage, and frequency of meetings with the grandchild. The chapter also focuses on grandparents' psychological well-being and the process of personal growth, a positive psychological change that includes changes in self-perception, interpersonal relationships, and priorities, and may be triggered by becoming a grandparent.

Keywords Grandparenthood • Grandparents • Grandchildren • Life transition • Life cycle • Well-being • Personal growth • Positive psychology

Look, the enjoyment is remarkable. It did something incredible [to me] from many angles, emotionally and...essentially emotionally. It opens channels that... it isn't quite clear how it works. I think that there's even something hormonal involved, really, the body goes through something, not only the emotions. Something happens that's extremely powerful (Grandmother)

I feel more complete, I feel I've accomplished the most meaningful mission there is in life (Grandmother).

The transition to grandparenthood is one of the most significant and exciting events in adult life, and leads to changes in the individual, the family, and intrafamily relations. However, contrary to the wealth of research into other life events during adulthood, particularly the transition to parenthood (e.g., Cowan et al. 1985; Glade et al. 2005; Keizer and Schenk 2012; Van Bussel et al. 2006; Wallace and Gotlib 1990), the transition to grandparenthood has not attracted extensive research attention. It may be that becoming a grandparent seems like a trivial experience in comparison to the dramatic change of becoming a parent, which involves the recruitment of a wide range of resources and demands adaptation at all levels (Glade et al. 2005). Indeed, for a long time, the transition to grandparenthood was perceived solely as a happy event that required no coping or adaptation of any sort.

The sparse scholarly interest in this life event might also stem from sociodemographic and sociocultural changes. Given the longer life expectancy in recent years, grandparents spend more time in this role, and take an active and meaningful part in their grandchildren's life, than in past years (Muller and Litwin 2011). Additionally, in recent decades, the family structure has undergone considerable change: more mothers are working full-time, divorce rates have risen, and there are more single-parent families by choice. These circumstances lead to a higher need for grandparents' help. Relying on grandparents' assistance has become increasingly common in the United States, England, and Australia, as has the phenomenon of grandparents raising their grandchildren as surrogate parents (Lumby 2010).

In addition, the study of development in older age in general is relatively new (Kallio and Pirttilä-Backman 2003). Although the contemporary approach holds that development occurs throughout the life course (Elder et al. 2003), not ceasing at the age of 18, the majority of developmental studies continue to relate exclusively to youngsters and young adults. Consequently, they ignore the fact that the extended lifespan and the new roles adopted in later stages of adult life in modern society mean that people often become grandparents at a time when they are still working and active in a variety of other domains. This situation makes it imperative to explore the competing roles and burdens in later adult life (Muller and Litwin 2011; Silverstein and Marenco 2001).

This chapter seeks to shed light on the transition to grandparenthood from a variety of perspectives. Throughout the chapter, we present the voices of the grandparents themselves, offering some of the thoughts and experiences they have shared with us in our studies. However, before focusing on specific characteristics of the transition to grandparenthood, we would like to consider certain aspects of life transitions in general.

2.1 Transitions Throughout the Lifespan

As noted above, research into adult development is relatively new (Elder et al. 2003; Kallio and Pirttilä-Backman 2003). Initial developmental theories related to infancy, early childhood, and adolescence, but paid little attention to later periods. Two of the most prominent theoreticians, whose influence on psychology is undeniable, are Sigmund Freud and Jean Piaget. Freud's psychoanalytic model consists of five psychosexual developmental stages (oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital), the last of which occurs around the age of 13 (Freud 1905). Similarly, Piaget posited four stages of cognitive development, (sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational), with the last beginning around the age of 11 (Piaget 1952). More recently, along with the emerging understanding that individuals continue to develop in adulthood as well, developmental psychologists

have added another stage, postformal thought, to characterize cognition at a later age (Kallio and Pirttilä-Backman 2003). Despite this addition, the underlying assumption of both theories is that individuals develop through a certain progression in their early years, and this development determines the rest of their lives, shaping their personalities, emotions, and behavior.

Erik Erikson, a follower of Freud, was the first eminent theoretician to relate to developmental stages throughout the lifespan, formulating a psychosocial model consisting of eight stages running from infancy to late adulthood. The three final stages relate to the mature periods (Erikson 1985).

According to Erikson (1985), in each stage, the individual has to cope with a “developmental crisis,” and the manner in which this crisis is resolved influences coping with the next stage. In the middle adulthood, the central developmental challenge is the conflict between investment in oneself and responsibility and commitment to family and society. Those who resolve this conflict so that they experience caring and concern for others will be better able to cope with old age. Erikson contended that the fear of death is lower when a person has a sense of continuity and immortality through children. From this perspective, it is reasonable to assume that the way a person experiences the transition to grandparenthood and his or her readiness for the new role depends on the resolution of previous developmental crises and conflicts.

Along with the assumption that the way one copes with each of the developmental challenges is influenced by earlier stages and affects future ones, modern scholars claim a person’s life may be viewed in terms of interactions between the various transitions they have gone through over the course of time (Perrig-Chiello and Perren 2005). Early transitions are considered particularly critical, impacting on life events that occur many years later. In other words, significant transitions that take place at an early age are definitive for later behavior (Elder 1998). Indeed, it has been found that normative life events and transitions predict several aspects of the well-being of middle-aged and older individuals at every point in time (Ryff and Heidrich 1997).

It goes without saying that transitions involve change. A person is in a transitional stage when there is a turning point in their life that requires adaptation and affects psychological development, such as leaving home, choosing a job or career, getting married, becoming a parent, or retiring (Cowan 1991; Lang et al. 2006). The changes also relate to the individual’s roles in life, which are now redefined or discarded in favor of new ones (Perrig-Chiello and Perren 2005).

The literature describes two kinds of transitions: normative, which are generally positive; and non-normative, which tend to be negative and undesired, such as unemployment, chronic disease, or accidents (Cowan 1991). As non-normative transitions are unexpected by definition, there is no time to prepare for them, which means that they require a special type of coping and adaptation. We concentrate here, however, on normative life events like the transition to grandparenthood, which is considered a natural and anticipated stage in life.

Furthermore, in contrast to life transitions which take place at a certain age in childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood, such as starting school, entering high school, or joining the work force, the transition to grandparenthood occurs within a wider and more flexible age range. This highlights the importance of the socio-cultural element, in addition to the biological, in determining the age at which a life transition may take place (Perrig-Chiello and Perren 2005). Society sets norms for the appropriate timing for each transition, and by doing so gives meaning to events and their function in the lifespan. This “social time” relates to the length and sequence of roles, as well as to expectations and beliefs about each age and role in life. For example, a person may be said to marry “early” or “late” (Elder 1994). Similarly, the transition to grandparenthood may occur at an age that accords with or diverges from social expectations. Moreover, unlike most transitions, the age at which an individual becomes a grandparent is dictated by the plans of their children, and thus there is an uncontrollable element inherent in this event.

As human development is not the product of biology and environment alone, individuals are capable of making choices and impacting their own development (Elder et al. 2003; Haase et al. 2012), particularly in adulthood. Adults in modern western societies can choose the family structure they wish to belong to, perhaps deciding to have a child before or without marrying their partner, to create a family with a same-sex partner, or not to share a household with their partner. In addition, the timing of the transition to parenthood is more of a personal choice than it was in the past, due in part to medical technologies which enable conception and childbirth at a later age. However, the transition to grandparenthood, as mentioned above, is not at all a matter of personal choice, but is dictated by the deliberate life transition of another person, the son or daughter who decides to become a parent. This element is quite unique in adult life. Although usually viewed as a positive event, becoming a grandparent is essentially “forced” on the individual, regardless of whether or not they desire the role.

2.2 The Significance of the Timing of the Transition to Grandparenthood

The transition to grandparenthood is therefore an example of intergenerational dynamics, whereby a change in one generation affects another. As the lives of the family members are interconnected and mutually influential, the individual’s development derives not only from the specific stage in their own life, but also from the developmental needs of other family members (Elder 1994). In the words of one grandfather:

I have a renewed understanding of what it means to be a young parent, and I enjoy the intergenerational continuity.

The transition to grandparenthood is typically said to begin with the birth of the first grandchild. However, findings of a study on first grandmotherhood raise questions as to whether this is indeed the starting point, or whether the change actually begins earlier, during the mother's pregnancy. Examining a sample of mothers of daughters pregnant with their first grandchild, the study looked into the older woman's well-being and perception of the costs involved in the new role. The findings revealed no significant differences between grandmothers' reports in the third trimester of the pregnancy and two months after the birth of the grandchild (Ben Shlomo et al. 2010).

As noted above, the transition to grandparenthood takes place within a broad age range. However, the specific age at which it occurs appears to be significant. It has been found that adults who become grandparents at a younger or older age than the social norm report feeling older than peers who do so at what is considered the "appropriate" time in life. Thus, there appears to be a greater chance that the new role will be accepted more positively, with less ambivalence, difficulties, and conflict, when the transition occurs at the expected time. Furthermore, people who enjoy being grandparents report feeling younger, perceive aging as occurring at a later age, and hope to live longer than those who do not enjoy their role as grandparents (Kaufman and Elder 2003). These findings indicate that the transition to grandparenthood plays a meaningful role in the individual's age identity, that is, in whether people perceive themselves to be young, middle-aged or elderly. This effect is demonstrated in the following comments.

In a sense, the fact that I have a granddaughter enables me to relive previous experiences I had with my children, which makes me feel younger and older at the same time (Grandfather).

Look, it makes me younger, yes, as many years have passed since I ran after my kids, barked like a dog, or pretended to eat them. And I haven't crawled on the floor or played with Lego, and it is fun to recall - not just to recall but to do everything again (Grandfather).

Grandparents' age has also been related to the relationship they have with their grandchildren. Younger grandparents tend to live closer to their grandchildren and be more involved in assisting in their upbringing, while older grandparents tend to help more financially and identify more with the grandparental role (Silverstein and Marengo 2001). Age has been shown to be associated not only with grandparenting style, but also with life satisfaction, with younger grandparents reporting higher satisfaction (Ben Shlomo 2014). Thus, the age at which the transition to grandparenthood occurs appears to influence the grandparents' expectations and perceptions, which in turn affect the way the transition is experienced.

2.3 Experiencing the Transition to Grandparenthood

The transition to grandparenthood brings with it a shift in status, roles, and identities. It signals the start of a new stage in life, with the parenting role now supplemented by the role of grandparent (Kaufman and Elder 2003). Similar to other life transitions, it entails a great many changes, which may be experienced either positively or negatively.

The grandparent's relationship with the young grandchild has been found to be associated with a sense of achievement, meaning, and worth (Silverstein and Marengo 2001; Thiele and Whelan 2008). In addition, a positive perception of the role of grandparent has been shown to be related to higher self-esteem and a lower level of depressive symptoms (Reitzes and Mutran 2004), as well as to the wish to live longer, as noted above (Kaufman and Elder 2003). Grandmothers and grandfathers alike claim that none of their roles in adulthood has given them as much satisfaction as being a grandparent (Peterson 1999), and their enjoyment of the role is even greater than they expected before their grandchild was born (Somary and Stricker 1998). Grandmothers are happy to fulfill the role, and perceive it as a "second career" that affords them tremendous satisfaction and contentment (Gauthier 2002). The comments below illustrate this attitude.

The thought of my grandson makes me blissful and happy. I've felt much better since he was born (Grandfather).

I'm more proud of my family, I dedicate more time to the family, I'm more at peace and happier with my life (Grandfather).

In interviews with grandfathers, following the birth of their first grandchild, they described the difference between being a father and being a grandfather. As grandfathers, they are able to spend more time with their grandchildren than they had with their children, and are more involved than they were as fathers (Cunningham-Burley 2001; Sorensen and Cooper 2010). In addition, they have more patience with their grandchildren than they had with their children, attributing this not only to the greater amount of free time they have at their current stage in life, but also to the fact that they have less responsibility for the children, and have mellowed with age (Cunningham-Burley 2001). Moreover, grandchildren, and especially grandsons, enable grandfathers an emotional relationship and intimacy they seldom experienced with their own children (Sorensen and Cooper 2010). These differences are expressed in the following comments.

I have discovered that I have more energy and patience, I have become a softer person. I devote more time to my grandchildren at the expense of work, and often think about how I raised my own children (Grandfather).

The relationship with my wife and children and with my granddaughter has become more meaningful and more intense. It's fun to play and spend time with a baby when I'm more settled and calmer than I was as a young father (Grandfather).

Interviews conducted with Italian grandmothers produced similar findings, reflecting the significance of the role in their lives. They reported that the relationship with their grandchild afforded them emotional expression they had never experienced in any other relationship, enabled them to relive their role as mothers, and gave them an opportunity to correct the mistakes they had made with their own children. Like grandfathers, they also noted having more free time to enjoy the child than they had had as mothers (Gattai and Musatti 1999). Examples of grandmothers' comments appear below.

I had no idea it was possible for there to be such love. I didn't believe it. How can I love my granddaughters more than my own children? No, it's not that I love them more, it's that I feel more.

There are four stages in life, and when a grandchild is born, you go one level up. You can see better from the tower.

It activated systems I didn't have with my children. I mean, it's different, definitely different...With the grandchildren you're more mature, much more grown up in many ways, not just one. So your starting point is different, completely different. You're much more available, you're not angry any more. With your children you tend to be angry, that's how I felt, and here everything is possible. I mean, not that there's chaos, not at all, but your whole attitude comes from a completely different place, it's different.

Numerous studies report the positive consequences of the transition to grandparenthood, some even claiming that becoming a grandparent has the most positive overall emotional valence of all transitions, followed by becoming a parent (Perrig-Chiello and Perren 2005). Nevertheless, positive affect may not be the only outcome. As with any transition, becoming a grandparent also entails the loss of previous identities and roles, as well as a variety of costs. In an Israeli study of grandmothers, the respondents reported both positive and negative thoughts and feelings. Higher active involvement with the grandchild was related to higher mental health among the grandmothers, but also to a higher perception of the costs involved in their role (Ben Shlomo et al. 2010). Given that the transition to grandparenthood generally takes place some time between the ages of fifty and sixty, a period considered young in modern society, the burdens on grandparents are considerable. Often they are still working, with some at the peak of their professional careers, they may have children living at home with them, they have social responsibilities and established leisure time activities, and now they are also expected to help care for their grandchildren and be involved in their nurturing. This burden may be very heavy, and result in complex personal and intergenerational tensions.

Negative emotions might also be aroused due to the fact that grandparenthood is symbolically associated with old age (Gauthier 2002), regardless of the chronological age of the individual or their level of vitality and activity. As Western society holds negative attitudes towards aging and views it as a threat (Perrig-Chiello and Perren 2005), acknowledging the process is painful, and involves awareness of unfulfilled hopes and expectations and limitations on future opportunities (Issroff 1994). These feelings may project on the way a person perceives their transition to grandparenthood.

Ambivalence toward the transition is apparent in psychoanalyst Issroff's (1994) description of her own experience:

I was struck by the extreme reactions of people when I told them I was about to become a grandmother. Either they said something like 'Oh, how wonderful' or 'You must feel so old'. Their responses confirmed the contradictory emotions that I felt. I felt narcissistically wounded by those who innocently asked me if this was my first and realized that I wanted to cling to the illusion that I didn't look like a grandmother. I was also aware of feeling out of control. Nobody asks you if you are ready to become a grandmother... As a relatively young grandmother I look forward to being able to watch and contribute to my grandson's growth and development, but his birth was a reminder that an era of my life is over. At the same time I was aware of many positive feelings - pride, pleasure, joy, and gratitude. Gradually I was able to acknowledge my ambivalence and think about the meaning of the feelings evoked by this important life event (pp. 260–261).

Nevertheless, the professional literature tends to ignore the negative features of becoming a grandparent, focusing almost exclusively on the positive aspects. Moreover, studies generally relate to grandparents solely as providers of support, not addressing their own needs at this time in their life. In this sense, research reflects the attitude in society: whereas there are numerous workshops and guide-books for expectant parents, virtually no such assistance is available for future grandparents, nor is it deemed necessary. As can be seen above, however, this is not the case. Much like becoming a parent, the transition to grandparenthood is a complex experience. A holistic, multidimensional examination of this transition is therefore needed not only to provide a fuller understanding of it, but also to enable interventions aimed at preparing people more effectively for their new role.

2.4 Factors Affecting the Experience of the Transition to Grandparenthood

In addition to age, another sociodemographic feature that has been found to affect the experience of grandparenthood is gender: men and women assimilate the role at a different pace. Grandfathers report that it takes them longer to provide help, become involved, and derive meaning from their new status in the family. In the early stages, they feel their role is not sufficiently well-defined, and may prefer to wait until the grandchild is a little older before playing an active part in his or her life (Cunningham-Burley 2001). One possible reason for this gender difference is the conventional role division, whereby women are more responsible for the care of infants. Indeed, studies show that with the birth of the first grandchild, women find it easier and more natural to step into the role of grandparent. Grandmothers were found to be more involved than grandfathers in caring for grandchildren (Silverstein and Marengo 2001), and to derive greater meaning and satisfaction from fulfilling this role. Whereas grandfathers feel capable of providing child-rearing advice to the parents, grandmothers report having to restrain themselves from giving too much

advice in order to avoid the tension that might arise as a consequence (Somary and Stricker 1998).

A number of studies, however, have found no gender differences between grandparents on variables such as role satisfaction (Peterson 1999). This may be a reflection of changes in the grandfather's role in contemporary society. Recent studies indicate that grandfathers today are more involved and active in their grandchildren's lives, and may therefore perceive their role as more meaningful (Mann and Leeson 2010). Nonetheless, despite the increased involvement of grandfathers, significant differences in role perceptions persist. In a study conducted in Britain, for example, grandfathers themselves noted that grandmothers play a more important role in caring for the grandchildren, while their own activities with their grandchildren largely involve games, sports, and fun. In addition, grandfathers reported perceiving greater flexibility and freedom in respect to their role than grandmothers, having greater license to resist norms relating to commitment and involvement and to be critical of their children's functioning as parents and of their grandchildren (Mann and Leeson 2010). The disparities in the research findings may indicate that the shift in the perception of the grandfather's role is still a work in progress.

Another factor found to impact the grandparenting experience is whether the individuals are paternal or maternal grandparents. Lineage has been associated both with the nature of the interaction with the grandchild and with the sense of meaning derived from it (Somary and Stricker 1998). Maternal grandparents assist more in caring for their grandchildren (Wheelock and Jones 2002), and they also experience the transition to the new role as consisting of more challenges and threats alike, perhaps in view of the more central role they play (Ben Shlomo 2014).

Several studies suggest that the relationships between grandparents and their son- or daughter-in-law may be vulnerable, with the grandmother-daughter-in-law dynamic in particular being potentially conflictual (Rittenour and Soliz 2009), complex, and negative (Turner et al. 2006). Mothers tend to turn to their own mother for child-rearing advice, ignoring what their mother-in-law has to say (Marx et al. 2011). They are more likely to ask for help from their mother as well (Gauthier 2002). Nevertheless, the relationship with the father's parents can also be close and meaningful (Santos and Levitt 2007), with both sides providing support to each other (Rittenour and Soliz 2009). Moreover, a recent study examining life satisfaction following the transition to maternal and paternal grandparenthood found no differences between the two groups (Ben Shlomo 2014).

It should be noted that the majority of the literature focuses on maternal grandmothers due to their more central role and the strong connection with their daughter (Somary and Stricker 1998). As a rule, the mother-daughter relationship is highly significant, and often becomes even closer and more meaningful after the daughter gives birth (Marx et al. 2011). Mothers report that the support they receive from their own mother is extremely important to them (Scelza 2011), and such support has, in fact, been shown to be associated with higher well-being among new mothers (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al. 2009). This situation may lead naturally to a stronger relationship between the maternal grandmother and the grandchild.

Lineage has also been found to influence role expectations. Paternal grandfathers and grandmothers expect to see their grandchild less frequently than maternal grandparents (Somary and Stricker 1998). The latter finding is significant, as frequency of meetings with the grandchild has been shown to be related to grandparents' role satisfaction: the more frequent the meetings, the higher the satisfaction (Peterson 1999).

2.5 Grandparents' Well-Being During the Transition to Grandparenthood

As illustrated by the comments below, many grandparents describe positive feelings during the transition to their new role, including enjoyment, satisfaction, pride, happiness, and contentment.

... a sense of pride, great happiness, and awe (Grandfather).

I became a grandmother just when I retired, earlier than expected, due to health problems. The combination of the two made it easier for me to go through this double transition. When I'm around my granddaughter, I feel totally healthy, young, and happy. During the week, I look forward to seeing her. I want to follow her development, to have time to enjoy watching her grow up (Grandmother).

A feeling of satisfaction and enormous happiness, concern, feeling of closeness to a member of my family – a sense of liberation (Grandfather).

New energy, a new joy in life, new spirit (Grandfather).

Various studies have sought to identify factors that may contribute to mental health in the transition to grandparenthood (e.g., Ben Shlomo et al. 2010). Although life transitions center around change, research has shown that the best predictors of successful coping are the individual's characteristics prior to the transition (Cowan 1991). Clearly, the better the mental health of the individual, the more likely they are to assume a new role in life with less turmoil and to view it as a positive event. Recent studies conducted in Israel have identified several factors, including sociodemographic, personality, and environmental features, which were associated with the mental health of individuals who became grandparents in the previous two years.

In respect to sociodemographic characteristics, physical health was found to be particularly important, with better physical health associated with better mental health (Ben Shlomo et al. 2010; Ben Shlomo and Taubman – Ben-Ari 2012) and greater life satisfaction (Ben Shlomo 2014). This is not surprising, as older age brings with it more health problems, and even those who are currently healthy are aware that good health can not be taken for granted. Economic status was also found to be a relevant factor, so that the better grandparents' economic status, the better their mental health (Ben Shlomo 2014; Ben Shlomo and Taubman – Ben-Ari 2012).

In regard to personality traits, studies indicate the prime importance of self-esteem. Self-esteem is defined as an individual's global perception of self, whether positive or negative, and includes self-worth, pride, and self-acceptance (Rosenberg 1979). The Israeli studies found that higher self-esteem was related to higher mental health and a lower perception of the costs involved in the transition among first-time grandmothers (e.g. Ben Shlomo et al. 2010). It is likely that higher self-esteem provides an individual with a sense of security, thereby protecting them from the feelings of anxiety and upheaval that may be aroused by the new role.

Sense of mastery was also shown to be related to new grandparents' mental health, so that the higher the sense of mastery, the better the mental health (Ben Shlomo et al. 2010; Ben Shlomo and Taubman – Ben-Ari 2012). Finally, greater optimism was associated with grandparents' mental health, similar to the association between this personality trait and adaptation to other life transitions (Ben Shlomo and Taubman – Ben-Ari 2012).

In the case of environmental features, it is important to note that the empirical literature generally views grandparents as the providers of support, ignoring the fact that they too need a support system in order to maintain their mental health. Indeed, the studies found that a higher perception of receiving support was related to better mental health among new grandparents (Ben Shlomo and Taubman – Ben-Ari 2012). Furthermore, new grandparents who perceived better family ties reported higher life satisfaction (Ben Shlomo and Taubman – Ben-Ari 2016).

Like any life transition, becoming a grandparent is liable to generate costs. It involves taking on tasks that may be experienced as burdensome, as well as meeting the expectations of other family members and of the grandparents themselves. Coping with the new challenges may put a strain on available resources, create new problems, amplify existing limitations and sensitivities, and lead to tension and anxiety. At the same time, however, it may also enable the development of new coping capabilities and a higher level of adaptation (Cowan 1991; Cowan and Cowan 1995). This potential is defined by theoreticians as personal growth.

2.6 Personal Growth Following the Transition to Grandparenthood

Since the birth of my grandson, I feel calmer and more relaxed, especially when I'm with him. My priorities have also changed; I devote more attention to my family at the expense of work, for example (Grandfather).

The term "personal growth" relates to positive psychological change that is experienced as a result of coping with challenging, and sometimes difficult, life events (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996). The concept was originally introduced to describe the response to traumatic events that destabilize the individual's existing

worldview and apprehension of their place in the world. In recent years, however, numerous studies have indicated that growth can also ensue from normative life events, such as the transitions to motherhood (e.g., Taubman – Ben-Ari et al. 2009, 2010), fatherhood (e.g., Spielman and Taubman – Ben-Ari 2009; Taubman – Ben-Ari et al. 2014; Taubman – Ben-Ari and Spielman 2014), and grandparenthood (e.g., Ben Shlomo et al. 2010; Taubman – Ben-Ari et al. 2012a, b). Events of this kind also call basic worldviews into question. When this leads to a process in which one's perceptions of life and self are reexamined and subsequently reconstructed in a more adaptive manner, enhancing the ability to cope efficiently with hardships and challenges, one can be said to evidence personal growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004).

The process of growth entails both cognitive and emotional aspects (Zollner and Maercker 2006). It is reflected in three major domains: a change in self-perception, resulting in a sense of greater inner strength and a heightened ability to rely on oneself and cope with negative life events; a change in the perception of one's relationships with others, whereby relationships become more meaningful and one has a greater capacity to gain from them; and a change in life philosophy, in the form of a greater appreciation of life and a change in priorities (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996). In other words, people who experience personal growth do not simply "overcome" an event, returning to the way they were prior to it, but rather develop in the wake of the event, becoming better adjusted, gaining more awareness of the meaning of life, and displaying healthier psychological functioning (Zollner and Maercker 2006).

It is important to bear in mind that although growth is a positive experience, it is not necessarily accompanied by improved well-being or a lower level of distress (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004). No systematic associations have been found between growth on the one hand and characteristics of mental health on the other, including depressive symptoms, anxiety, anger, avoidance, self-esteem, meaning in life, and adaptation, among others (Zollner and Maercker 2006). This may be explained by the fact that personal growth does not reflect changes in well-being in the sense of affective state and hedonic enjoyment of life, but rather genuine development in terms of the understanding of one's role in life acquired through construction of a sense of meaning and commitment to the challenges encountered in the course of life (Joseph and Linley 2008).

In a recent series of studies conducted in Israel on personal growth following the transition to grandparenthood, new grandparents reported feelings and thoughts that indicate a process of growth, including changes in self-perception, interpersonal relationships, and priorities (Taubman – Ben-Ari 2012; Taubman – Ben-Ari and Ben Shlomo 2014). Changes in self-perception are reflected, for example, in comments like those below, which show that grandparents have discovered traits and abilities of which they were unaware prior to the birth of their grandchild.

There was a large hole that is filled up by this role. I'm happy and delighted to be around her. I'm like a lover! I miss her and I'm always looking forward to seeing her because it fills this big space in my life. I feel wanted, loved, and needed. My self-esteem is much higher now. (Grandmother).

Back then, there wasn't this whole issue of expressing feelings like there is today. Today I have learnt from my children and I communicate with them much more, hugging and kissing them. The family is extremely important to me... I discovered my sensitivity and emotionality. I didn't know how much sensitivity there is in me; they've drawn it out of me. All this hugging, it's so moving. It's strengthened my understanding of how strong I am and how capable of achieving whatever I want (Grandfather).

Grandparents also feel they have been given an opportunity to correct mistakes they made as parents, as evidenced in the following remarks.

The transition to grandmotherhood enabled me to come to terms with my parenthood and maybe gives me another chance to give, to influence, and to become a significant person in my grandchildren's lives. (Grandmother).

I feel that my relationship with my granddaughter comes from a calmer and more mature place than the relationship I had with my children (Grandmother).

In addition, grandparents' stories demonstrate improvement in personal and familial relationships following the transition to grandparenthood. They refer to the strengthening of their relationship with their children and their grandchildren, and the satisfaction and meaning these relationships afford them. Furthermore, they feel they have become part of "the community of grandparents", and some also note the cementing of their relationship with their spouse. The change in interpersonal relationships is apparent in the comments below.

My mood has improved, my relationship with my partner is better, I have more patience and tolerance for many things, a general feeling of serenity and forbearance (Grandfather).

I think that being a grandmother caused my husband and me to be together in a new and special way, something very strong. Today we are sharing an experience which gives us a lot of joy, and it leads to a strong bond between us (Grandmother).

Another dimension has been added to my life. I have something new in common with some of my friends, and I have another person to care for and think about. I feel unconditional love for my granddaughter (Grandmother).

Finally, changed priorities, new goals in life, and a new outlook on life are all reflected in grandparents' comments. They talk about a new sense of pride derived from knowing they can help shape the young generation and serve as a role model to them. As can be seen below, they also note acknowledging their children as grown-ups with the change of their status to parents.

I'm more sensitive and open to the family and to others, proud of what I have achieved – my family and my granddaughter. I feel that I can, and must, be a model for her (Grandfather).

I have less free time today, because much of my time is spent with my grandson. My attitude to my grandson is softer; I'm less concerned about teaching him how to behave. I have a stronger feeling of responsibility for the extended family, a stronger perception of my son as a person with his own family (Grandfather).

Another interesting point raised by grandparents is the difference between the relationship they had with their children and the one they establish with their grandchildren.

The most pronounced change is the memory of raising my children that comes back to me. It's very refreshing to recall how it was. In addition, my perspective about children's upbringing has changed. Bringing up children means being on the inside, and with my granddaughter I get an interesting view from the outside. It makes me want to continue being involved in her life, and curious about what will happen with her in the future. It's different from raising children, when you concentrate very much on the present and you have no time to look into the distance. I'm very impressed and proud that my granddaughter is so close to me, and don't quite understand what I have done to earn this huge love of hers. I have so much fun with her, and so I do my best to make time for it on a regular basis (Grandfather).

In addition to the studies that found personal growth among grandparents by means of self-reports acquired by questionnaires or interviews, two studies questioned another family member, either the spouse or offspring, regarding changes in the grandparent following the birth of the first grandchild (Taubman – Ben-Ari and Ben Shlomo 2014). Associations were found in these studies between grandparents' reports and the reports of significant others, indicating that personal growth is an experience that can be detected and acknowledged by people close to the individual.

The evidence of the potential to experience growth among grandparents raises the question of what factors might enable growth. Studies have examined several possibilities, including grandparents' sociodemographic characteristics, inner resources such as their personality traits, and external resources such as their marital relationship.

Similar to its role in the experience of becoming a grandparent, gender was also found to be associated with personal growth following the transition, with grandmothers reporting higher growth than grandfathers (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al. 2013, 2014). This may result from the difference in role perception and satisfaction between men and women, as described above. As the role of grandmother is perceived to be more central and significant, it may lead to a more profound developmental change, that is, to greater personal growth.

Age was also found to be related to personal growth, but only among grandmothers, with older grandmothers reporting higher growth (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al. 2012, 2013). This, too, may be linked to their greater involvement, which is likely to bring with it more difficulties and burdens than those of grandfathers. In addition, older age may increase concerns about health problems and physical limitations, as well as awareness of the time that has passed since the woman herself was a mother, thereby heightening her anxiety, which in turn may enhance the possibility of growth. In line with this explanation, one study found an association between lower health status and higher growth among grandmothers (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al. 2013).

Finally, an association was found between fewer years of education and higher growth among both grandparents (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al. 2013), similar to findings reported for mothers (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al. 2010). All these sociodemographic characteristics represent less favorable circumstances which may lead to greater tension and anxiety, and therefore may facilitate growth. As explained above, personal growth is a positive change that occurs as a consequence of coping with hardship. It may be assumed that the more difficult an individual's circumstances, the harder it will be for them to cope with the added burdens entailed in the transition to grandparenthood. As the challenge is greater, the sense of pride, accomplishment, and satisfaction derived from successfully managing it will also be greater. Such a process of positive change and learning on the new strengths and capabilities may stem from coping with the new role of grandparenthood.

As for internal resources, one of the personality traits that has been measured is grandparent's self-esteem. It was found that lower self-esteem among grandmothers was related to higher personal growth (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al. 2012a, b, 2014). This is similar in essence to the results obtained for the sociodemographic characteristics. Thus, like individuals who are older or less educated, those with lower self-esteem who successfully cope with the challenge of becoming grandparents might discover new qualities or abilities in themselves, leading to a sense of personal growth.

In respect to external resources, it was found that grandparent's personal growth was associated with that experienced by their spouse (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al. 2013). This suggests that the spousal relationship may enhance the possibility of a positive change by enabling the individual to share the meaningful experience of grandparenthood. Another factor found to be associated with growth among grandmothers is the frequency of meetings with the daughter who has recently become a mother (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al. 2012a, b). This measure might indicate either of a good mother-daughter relationship to begin with, or the opportunity to establish a better relationship between the two women than before the birth of the grandchild. In addition, higher meeting frequency most likely reflects greater involvement and commitment to the daughter, as well as a closer relationship with the grandchild. Similarly, among grandfathers, the frequency of meetings with the grandchild was positively associated with personal growth (Ben Shlomo and Taubman – Ben-Ari 2016). This may stem from significantly relationship which requires higher commitment and coping with the grandfather role.

External resources, in the form of the support system available to the individual, allow them to share feelings, receive emotional and instrumental support, and feel secure. This, in turn, enables them to develop a more adaptive perception of the new challenges they are facing (Cryder et al. 2006; Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004). Knowing that during challenging periods in life, which demand a reorganization and reconstruction of reality, there are significant others who will be at your side and share the difficulties with you is an essential and crucial part of the growth experienced in the transition to grandparenthood.

Taken together, the findings yielded by these studies indicate that lower personal resources and higher external resources facilitate the experience of growth among new grandparents. Moreover, they are in line with the results of investigations examining growth among women during the transition to motherhood (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al. 2009).

Most importantly, the studies demonstrate that a process of positive change occurs, at least among some individuals, in the wake of the transition to grandparenthood. Not surprisingly, however, if we compare the level of personal growth experienced by first-time parents with that of first-time grandparents, we find higher growth among new parents. The difference may stem from the fact that although the transition to grandparenthood is a significant life event, it is less dramatic than the transition to parenthood, and involves less momentous challenges (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al. 2012a, b, 2014). This does not diminish the importance of the transition to grandparenthood for the individual, but merely indicates a lower inherent potential for change than in the transition to parenthood.

Above all, the finding of growth among grandparents demonstrates the considerable significance of this role in life as a trigger for changes in perceptions of the self, interpersonal relationships, and indeed, life in general. It also indicates that this life transition, although positive in nature, also generates stress and necessitates coping. The positive change that may ensue as a result of the need to reexamine one's life, that is, personal growth, actually occurs because of the complex challenges posed by the new role.

To conclude, the transition to grandparenthood appears to be second in significance only to the transition to parenthood in adult life. In modern Western society, the role of grandparent has become even more central in the wake of sociodemographic and socioeconomic changes, as well as the acceptance of a multiplicity of family structures. Although current knowledge of the processes involved in the transition to grandparenthood is incomplete, both clinicians and researchers are displaying growing interest in the subject. It is hoped that further investigations will not only increase our theoretical understanding of how people cope with this life event, but will ultimately inform counselling and interventions, both on the individual and family levels, as well.

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