Becoming and Developing:

Personal Growth in the Wake of Parenthood and Grandparenthood

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Being A’s mother is not just being a mother. It is being a mother who gave birth to a 700-gram infant in the 24th week of her pregnancy, and from that moment on, motherhood and love have been closely tied to concerns with life and death.... Motherhood with A is different from motherhood with my two girls. I’m excited by every bit of progress he makes, and I never forget - even for a single moment - the trials we went through in the NICU. I weep with emotion when I remember holding him when he weighed less than 1 kg, and how I taught him to nurse when other babies born in the 24th week couldn’t do it yet. Above all, my experience of motherhood includes feeling grateful to God for our miracle, day by day amazement at this child who is developing well. Though there are still some milestones he has not yet reached, for me he is "the king of the world"... Being A’s mother, each and every day he teaches me the meaning of patience, and that no other experience is as deep as motherhood. Whenever I look at him I have a sense of exaltation and pure joy that I have been granted this gift. -- Mother of a 2-year-old boy

The transition to parenthood is one of the most significant role changes in an individual’s life (e.g., Feeney, Hohaus, Noller, & Alexander, 2001). But while the birth of a child is generally viewed as a joyful event, it may also generate stress and thus shares certain features with negative life experiences. First, it inevitably calls into question basic assumptions about one’s personal competence, life, and future, and therefore may produce considerable anxiety that can be difficult to manage. Secondly, the transition may disrupt the lives of family members (e.g., Cowan & Cowan, 1999; Feeney et al., 2001) and bring about a decline in personal and marital well-being (e.g., Helms-Erikson, 2001). Women in particular experience the transition to motherhood not only as joyful, fulfilling, and challenging, but also as a cause of stress, anxiety, feelings of incompetence, and loneliness, as well as a sense of loss in terms of autonomy, time, appearance, and occupational identity (e.g., Nicolson, 1999).
adverse childbirth experiences, such as pain or life-threatening complications, may intensify the negative experiences of new mothers, engendering moderate to severe stress (Olde, Kleber, van der Hart, & Pop, 2006).

The transition to grandparenthood is second only to parenthood in terms of its significance in family life cycle. Although becoming a grandparent and caring for grandchildren are typically associated with positive outcomes such as successful aging, actively engaging with life, involvement with friends and family, and meaning in life (e.g., Rowe & Kahn, 1998), the transition is also symbolically associated with old age, regardless of the individual's chronological age or vitality (Gauthier, 2002). In addition, contemporary grandparents might be caught between the conflicting demands of workplace and career, on the one hand, and family commitments on the other (e.g., Mann & Leeson, 2010), or between the needs of their other children and the ones who have recently become parents. Thus, the transition to grandparenthood may also induce stress as well as promote happiness.

Nevertheless, as with any stress-related event, the upheaval resulting from the loss of cherished roles along with new and challenging demands may provide an opportunity to create a better life structure and enable individuals to find new strengths and appreciate the value of supportive others. In other words, the need to adapt to demanding circumstances in the transition to parenthood or grandparenthood may also engender personal growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Thus, although many of the chapters in this book deal with existential concerns and treat them as threats that often lead to defensiveness and demoralization, the current chapter focuses on the opportunity embedded in difficult or challenging experiences to initiate beneficial and appreciated periods of personal growth.

Three broad areas of growth are generally reported following stressful events: enhanced interpersonal relationships and greater appreciation of others; changes in self-perception in the direction of increased resilience and maturity; and reexamination of life philosophy and
the setting of new priorities. Analysis of the items on the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI), developed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) to assess positive changes in the wake of adversity, has led to the conceptualization of these three areas as five dimensions: new possibilities, relating to others, personal strength, spiritual change, and appreciation of life. The scale tapping these dimensions has been employed and validated in a wide variety of studies and diverse populations (e.g., Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

It is important to note that the term “growth” refers to a perceptible sense of improvement, and not to a return to baseline. Growth is not an enhancement in well-being or a decrease in level of distress (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), but rather an indication that a person has developed beyond his or her previous level of adaptation, psychological functioning, or understanding of life (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). Moreover, studies examining the relationship between growth and both negative and positive characteristics of mental health, including depressive symptoms, anxiety, and anger, on the one hand, and self-esteem and adaptation on the other, have found no systematic associations between them (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). Thus, growth does not appear to reflect changes in well-being in the sense of emotional state and hedonic tone, but a genuine personal development that enables individuals to better understand their place in the world, including the meaning of life and their commitment to the challenges it presents them with (Joseph & Linley, 2008).

Although most of the literature on growth deals with traumatic life events, such as the death of a loved one or a serious illness, as noted above, growth is not exclusively related to negative experiences; it may also follow a challenge to, and consequent reexamination of, one’s core beliefs (Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2007). Because growth refers to positive psychological changes experienced as a result of struggling with demanding circumstances – circumstances that require adaptive resources and challenge the way people understand the world and their place in it – I would argue that positive experiences can also be life-altering
and entail stress. That is, they may challenge an individual’s schemas and life narrative, and therefore lead to growth.

Indeed, the literature on the adaptation to motherhood provides indications of this possibility, showing that during the transition to motherhood, women may gain self-esteem, new meaning in life, a sense of competence, and awareness of the positive features of themselves and their social environment (Wells, Hobfoll, & Lavin, 1999). In one early study, almost 60% of mothers whose newborns had been in a neonatal intensive care unit reported some benefits, including improved relationships with family and friends, emotional growth, and an appreciation of just how precious their child was. Others felt that their vulnerability made them more emotionally expressive and appreciative of their inner resources, thereby improving their utilization of a social support system they had previously ignored (Affleck, Tennen, Allen, & Gershman, 1986). Although the term “growth” was not yet employed in these studies, they indicated that the kinds of growth identified in trauma victims might also be found in new mothers.

The following sections rely on a series of recent studies conducted by my colleagues and me. They take the research on stress and growth one step further, allowing for a multidimensional perspective on the complex experience of growth following the transition to parenthood or grandparenthood. The data were collected and analyzed using qualitative and quantitative methods, self-reports and others’ reports on growth, and cross-sectional and longitudinal research designs. Various factors, both internal and external, which might play a role in the experience of growth were examined.

Do Parents and Grandparents Really Experience Growth?

*I have become much more independent and responsible. I cope with challenges I never thought I could handle, such as functioning after a whole night without sleep.* -- Mother of 3.5-month-old boy
As explained above, personal growth consists of perceived positive changes in interpersonal relationships, self-perceptions, and priorities. These outcomes were mentioned spontaneously by parents and grandparents when describing their thoughts and feelings about their current status, either in response to open-ended questions on self-report questionnaires (Taubman – Ben-Ari, Findler, & Sharon, 2011) or in face-to-face interviews (Findler, 2009). Typical indications of such growth are presented below in the participants own words.

**Enhanced Interpersonal Relationships and Greater Appreciation of Others**

*Following the birth, our partnership became stronger. The shared process of concern for the child and taking care of him sometimes causes stress and crises, but mostly it brings the parents closer together as a couple.*  
Father of 6-month-old son

*I think that being a grandmother brought my husband and me together in a new and very special way, something very strong. Today we share experiences that we are very happy with, and this is a strong bond.*  
Grandmother of 2-year-old and 4.5-month-old boys

*I have learned that I have the strength to cope with difficult situations thanks to the great support I got and am still getting from my family [siblings and parents]. My husband and I cooperate in every situation and deal with everything together.*  
Mother of a 4-year-old girl

These examples reveal how new parents and grandparents perceive their relationships with others. Parents tend to focus on their new-found understanding of the importance of the people around them, how appreciative they are for the help and support they have received, and the positive effects on marital and intergenerational relationships. They also refer to an increased ability to ask for help and to allow themselves to rely on others, an experience many of them were not open to before they became parents. Grandparents tend to speak about the strengthening of their relations with their son/daughter and the new generation, and how fulfilling and satisfying the experience is. They also experience becoming part of a new community, the “fellowship” of grandparents. Both groups mention a stronger or deeper connection with others.
Changes in Self-Perception in the Direction of Increased Resilience and Maturity

I feel I'm better able to express abilities and capabilities that I didn’t call on before. I can make better, more rational decisions. I feel I'm more responsible and empowered in many ways. -- First-time father

The transition to grandparenthood enabled me to come to terms with my parenting and maybe give myself another chance to give, influence, and be an important figure in my grandchildren’s lives. -- First-time grandmother

The experience of motherhood is empowering and life-changing. I put my sense of guilt behind me (as far as possible) and live most of the time with a feeling of satisfaction and love for my children. I’ve become more efficient, competent, and sensitive to communications with the people around me. My time management is more effective. -- Mother of a 4-year-old boy

I feel that my relationship with my granddaughter comes from a calmer and more mature place than the relationship I had with my own children. -- First-time grandfather

Clearly, both parents and grandparents learn something new about their abilities and find capacities in themselves they were unaware of even a short time before the transition. They learn that they are stronger than they thought, and discover traits they are proud of, including greater responsibility, efficiency, and sensitivity to others’ needs. These new insights give them a sense of empowerment. Grandparents also mention the opportunity they have been given to “fix” the mistakes they made as parents, to be better as grandparents than they were as parents.

Reexamination of Life Philosophy and Setting New Priorities

I see things from a different perspective. My priorities have changed. Things I focused on in the past have given way to a stronger focus on the family. -- Father of a 2-year-old girl

My priorities have changed. The most important thing for me right now is to be with my daughter and give her everything she needs, physically, emotionally, mentally…That comes before everything else – the rest of the family (my brothers and sisters, for instance), work, hobbies, friends. -- First-time mother
Transitioning to a new familial role affects self-development, altering priorities, rethinking of existing schemes and structures, and setting new goals in life. Parenthood often brings with it a shift from a focus on self-fulfillment through a career to nesting and enriching the family space.

Importantly, although the examples above have been organized to illustrate certain dimensions of growth, their categorization into separate themes is at times artificial; many of them are associated with more than one dimension, suggesting that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

In view of the indications of growth revealed with qualitative methods, I undertook a series of systematic quantitative studies. As will become evident below, most studies assessing growth in the transition to parenthood and grandparenthood use the PTGI (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) as a measurement tool, adapting the general instructions to fit the specific life transition examined. One of my studies therefore sought to determine whether the PTGI is indeed a suitable instrument to measure personal changes following childbirth. I content-analyzed mothers’ responses to open-ended questions regarding positive changes that occurred following the birth of their child (or children in the case of twins), and the themes that emerged were compared with the PTGI items. Two samples of mothers were studied. The first consisted of 150 relatively new first-time mothers (3-24 months following delivery); the second sample was more diverse, comprising 157 mothers in various sub-groups (first-time and non-first-time mothers, mothers of twins and singletons, mothers of pre- and full-term babies). In both samples, compatibility was found between the spontaneous responses and the PTGI items (Taubman – Ben-Ari, Findler, & Sharon, 2011). In other words, the positive changes that mothers report after giving birth do appear to indicate growth as originally conceptualized by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996).
This conclusion was also borne out by a study of psychological growth in British women following childbirth: Sawyer and Ayers (2009) found that half of the women in their sample reported at least a moderate degree of growth. They then compared their findings with studies of other life events and found that the growth level of the mothers was similar to that reported following accidents and assaults (Snape, 1997) and mixed traumatic events (Wild & Paivio, 2003), although lower than the levels reported by individuals suffering chronic illness or bereavement (Cordova, Cunningham, Carlson, & Andrykowski, 2001; Polatsky & Esprey, 2000).

So far, all studies of mothers’ growth have relied on self-reports, which may be affected by self-serving biases or socially desirable responding. I therefore decided to see whether signs of growth would also be detected by more objective external evaluators. I examined the association between self-reported and other-reported personal growth in three different samples. In the first sample, both first-time mothers and their own mothers completed the PTGI, with the grandmothers reporting on changes in their daughters following the transition to motherhood. Significant positive correlations were found between the two groups on the five factors as well as on the total growth scores (Taubman – Ben-Ari, Findler, & Sharon, 2011). The next two samples were grandparents. In the first, spouses’ responses to the PTGI were compared, and in the second, grandparents’ self-reports were compared with reports of their child who had recently become a parent. The self-reports of new grandparents and their growth as perceived by their spouses were significantly positively correlated, and these results were replicated by significant correlations between grandparents’ own reports and their offsprings’ reports about their parents’ growth (Taubman – Ben-Ari, Findler, & Ben Shlomo, 2011c). Thus, reported growth is not just an artifact of self-reports; it can also be seen by external observers. In light of these findings, I turned to the next question: Which
individuals are more likely to experience growth in the wake of parental and grandparental
life transitions?

What Factors May Enable the Experience of Growth among Parents?

*I discovered that I have strengths and characteristics I didn’t know about before, such as patience, an
extraordinary ability to educate and set limits, and a capacity to cope with the different situations the
children confront me with.* -- Mother of 4-year-old twins, a boy and a girl

Perceived Stress and Cognitive Appraisals

One of the basic premises of growth theories is that some degree of stress is required to
initiate and maintain it, whether or not the individual is fully aware of the stress. However,
few of the studies of growth on the part of parents have directly considered the issue of stress.

Certain special circumstances of childbirth have been shown to elicit stress. For example,
parenthood resulting from fertility treatments is considered stressful, and people suffering
from infertility often report distress (e.g., Chen, Chang, Tsai, & Juang, 2004). Likewise,
giving birth to a preemies baby is recognized as stressful (e.g., Goldberg & DeVitto, 2002).

When a baby is born prematurely, before the parents are psychologically ready for
parenthood, they may experience not only disappointment that their expectations for a normal
delivery and healthy infant were not fulfilled, but there is also an additional emotional burden
of anxiety over the infant’s survival, health, and development (Pederson, Bento, Chance,
Evans, & Fox, 1987). This joins the realization that they cannot care for their own babies,
particularly if the infants are removed to special facilities, in which case they may be forced
to come to terms with a hospital stay of unknown length and the possibility of life-threatening
complications or compromised development (DeMier, Hynan, Harris, & Manniello, 1996).

Most relevant to the present discussion, individuals in these stressful circumstances often
report greater growth than those in more normal conditions. Mothers of preterm twins
reported greater growth than mothers of either full-term twins or singletons one year after
giving birth (Taubman – Ben-Ari, Findler, & Kuint, 2010), and first-time parents of preemies
reported greater growth than parents of full-term babies, both one month (Spielman & Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2009) and two years (Spielman, 2011) after delivery. Similarly, first-time parents who underwent fertility treatments reported greater growth 6-12 months after the birth than those who had conceived spontaneously (Bar-Shua, 2011). Thus, in all of these studies, the group likely to have experienced higher levels of stress also reported greater growth. This suggests that stressful circumstances make it possible to perceive childbirth as a crisis, with its inherent potential for stress-related growth.

Two of the studies also examined the relationship between stress and growth directly, revealing a more complex picture. In one (Spielman, 2011), first-time fathers and mothers of pre- or full-term babies were asked to report on their parental stress two years after the birth. A significant positive association was found between growth and certain dimensions of parental stress among mothers, although not among fathers. In the other study (Bar-Shua, 2011), first-time parents were examined 6-12 months after delivery, with those who had undergone fertility treatments compared with those who had conceived spontaneously. Whereas women’s level of parental stress was not significantly associated with their reported growth, the higher their spouse’s level of stress, the greater was their own perceived growth. In addition, the greater parental stress the man reported, the higher his experienced growth. Higher parental stress reported by the woman was related to lower perceived growth among the men in the spontaneous conception group, but to higher levels of experienced growth among the men in the fertility treatments group. Although these findings are not entirely consistent, they indicate that a parent’s growth may be related not only to their own stress level, but also to that experienced by their spouse, and may be exacerbated by objective circumstances as well. This suggests that an important issue for understanding of growth is the way a situation is appraised by an individual.
Cognitive appraisal is the process by which a person decides whether a particular event or experience is relevant to his or her well-being, and if so, how. Primary appraisal concerns whether something has occurred that may affect the individual’s social image or self-esteem. This includes threat appraisal – the belief that a transaction with the environment may endanger the person’s well-being – and challenge appraisal, where there is a possibility for mastery or benefit. Secondary appraisal relates to coping options and evaluation of the personal resources available for contending with the situation. In effect, this is an appraisal of self-efficacy, of one’s ability to manage the demands of an encounter or actualize personal commitments (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985).

A series of studies indicate the importance of cognitive appraisal to the growth of new mothers. One study found that appraising motherhood as a challenge was associated with more reported personal growth during pregnancy among expectant first-time mothers. Furthermore, although growth two months after delivery was related most strongly to the general level of growth during pregnancy, appraisal of motherhood as a challenge during pregnancy was the only factor measured before the birth that was significantly associated with growth after delivery (Taubman – Ben-Ari, Ben Shlomo, Sivan, & Dolizki, 2009).

The importance of cognitive appraisal was confirmed in another study of first-time mothers conducted 3-24 months after birth, which showed that lower appraised threat was related to higher perceived growth, especially for those who reported more social support (Taubman – Ben-Ari, Ben Shlomo, & Findler, 2011). Thus, it appears that cognitive appraisals of motherhood begin to play a role during pregnancy, and are able to predict growth not only during that period, but also following the birth of the child. The studies indicate that growth is enhanced by perceiving the situation as more of a challenge and less of a threat, especially when these appraisals are backed up by support from significant others.
Nevertheless, perceived stress and the evaluation of the situation as a threat or a challenge do not explain fully why some people grow more than others in the wake of parenthood. Certain background variables and internal resources are also important.

**Sociodemographic Variables and Internal Resources**

The few studies that have examined both mothers and fathers consistently find that mothers report greater growth than fathers. This was found both among first-time parents of full- and pre-term children about one month of age (Spielman & Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2009) and two years of age (Spielman, 2011), and in parents of infants aged 6-12 months, regardless of conceiving either spontaneously or following fertility treatments (Bar-Shua, 2011). In the last of these studies, mothers scored higher than fathers not only on the total growth measure, but also on each of three areas of growth (change in self-perception, change in perceived relations with others, and change in life philosophy). These results are in line with the majority of studies of gender differences in growth following adverse events, indicating that women reported higher levels of benefit (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996; Ryff, Lee, Essex, & Schmutte, 1994; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). One explanation for the perception of more growth among women is their ability to embrace and admit their feelings more than men, allowing them to recognize positive change when it occurs (McMillen & Fisher, 1998).

The transition to parenthood inevitably has a stronger impact on mothers than fathers, including the physiological changes of pregnancy, birth, and (in many cases) nursing, and often the need to give up some independence and a former way of life (Nicolson, 1999). These larger life changes may be associated with a more powerful sense of personal growth. Other sociodemographic variables have yielded less conclusive results. Some studies have found age to be an important variable for mothers, with younger mothers reporting greater growth (Sawyer & Ayers, 2009; Taubman – Ben-Ari, Ben Shlomo, & Findler, 2011; Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2010). If younger mothers are less mature and self-confident than
older mothers, the transition to motherhood may initiate a self-learning process that reveals personal strengths. Other studies suggest that less education among women (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2010) and lower economic status among men, especially those using fertility treatments (Bar-Shua, 2011), may be associated with growth following childbirth.

Psychological variables are also relevant to growth. Numerous studies of well-being, adaptation to demanding circumstances, and mental health have shown that certain personality traits, or ego resources, enable positive responses to stress. Among new mothers, one of those variables is self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979), which is positively associated with psychological adjustment, including the view that motherhood is not threatening to one’s health (Terry, Mchugh, & Noller, 1991). A study of first-time parents questioned about a month after their child’s birth found that self-esteem was associated with greater reported growth among mothers, but not among fathers (Spielman & Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2009), however a study examining expectant mothers found that although self-esteem was related to women’s mental health, it was not associated with perceived growth (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2009).

Other studies revealed that among first-time mothers who had given birth 3-24 months earlier, self-esteem was related to reported meaning in life, but not with growth (Taubman – Ben-Ari, Ben Shlomo, & Findler, 2011). In another study (Spielman, 2011), although self-esteem was not associated with growth among first-time mothers of 2-year-old children, it was inversely related to personal growth among fathers who perceived their child to have an easy temperament. These results follow studies of posttraumatic growth which have also found no systematic associations with self-esteem and other characteristics of mental health (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006).

Another internal resource used to manage stressful situations is attachment orientation, consisting of two dimensions: avoidance and anxiety (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998;
Those high on avoidance are characterized by a distrust of others’ goodwill and a preference for emotional distance, relying mostly on themselves and failing to rely on others to relieve distress. Those scoring high on attachment anxiety have a strong need for closeness combined with an overwhelming fear of rejection, and tend to dwell on their emotional state and rely on emotion-focused coping strategies. People who score low on both dimensions are considered secure with respect to attachment; they are comfortable with closeness and interdependence, and rely on support seeking and other constructive means of coping with stress.

Secure mothers appraise motherhood in more positive terms, perceive more available support, are more likely to seek support, and report less psychological distress (e.g., Berant, Mikulincer, & Florian, 2001). With respect to personal growth, although some studies have found no association between attachment and growth among mothers up to one year after giving birth (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2009; Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2010), others have found attachment anxiety is related to growth among first-time mothers and fathers 6-12 months (Bar-Shua, 2011), as well as two years (Spielman, 2011) after the birth. In another study, this association was found only among first-time fathers about a month after their child’s birth (Spielman & Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2009). Avoidant attachment was associated with greater growth only among fathers of 2-year-olds (Spielman, 2011).

The suggestion that attachment anxiety may be a factor in parents’ growth is in line with research showing that in times of turmoil, attachment-anxious individuals feel more threatened, and consequently make strong efforts to obtain comfort and support from their attachment figures (Mikulincer, 1997; Shaver & Mikulincer, this volume). During the stressful transition to parenthood, these tendencies, along with the presence of a baby who is totally dependent on them, may cause such people to feel overwhelmed. Their ability to “survive” the experience may result in enhanced self-confidence, a heightened sense of trust,
and a fuller understanding of the meaning of life and the value of a family (Cadell, Regehr, & Hemsworth, 2003), which may be interpreted as growth.

**External Resources**

Besides internal resources, there are also important resources in the external environment (e.g., Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Park et al., 1996; Prati & Pietrantoni, 2009). One of these is social support, which may include love, caring, solidarity, and the satisfaction of personal needs, including material or instrumental needs (Wandersman, Wandersman, & Kahn, 1980). Regarding new parents, a prospective study found that marital relationship quality during a first pregnancy was associated with women’s reports of growth during that period, and greater support from their mothers was associated with greater self-reported growth a few months after the birth (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2009). Another study, which compared mothers of preterm twins, full-term twins, and full-term singletons a year after the birth, revealed a connection between support from the maternal grandmother and a mother’s reported growth, especially among mothers of full-term twins. In addition, more contact between mothers and grandmothers was associated with reports of greater growth (Taubman – Ben-Ari, Ben-Shlomo, & Findler, 2011). Associations have also been found between women’s perceived marital quality and growth, mainly among mothers with less education and those who harbor negative feelings toward their children (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2010), and between men’s marital satisfaction and their growth following childbirth (Bar-Shua, 2011). It seems that a supportive mother or spouse are reflections of closer relationships that facilitate the emergence of growth, by creating a positive atmosphere for coping with the stresses, by lessening the mother’s practical and mental burden, and by allowing her to share her difficulties with significant others.
What Factors May Enable the Experience of Growth among Grandparents?

A new layer has been added to my life. I have something else in common with some of my friends, and I have another person to care for and think about. I feel a new unconditional love for my granddaughter. --First-time grandfather of a 6-month-old girl

Recent increases in the lifespan of people in developed countries mean more years of shared life between generations and more grandparents living to see their grandchildren grow up (Silverstein & Long, 1998). The few studies of personal growth among grandparents have yielded interesting insights regarding factors relevant to such growth.

**Perceived Stress and Cognitive Appraisals**

One study of grandfathers focused on stresses that might be evoked by the grandparent-grandchild relationship and its connection to five growth dimensions. It included three stress factors: grandfather’s distress, dysfunctional grandfather-grandchild relations, and perception of the grandchild as difficult (following Abidin’s (1990) “parental stress”). The study indicated that lower grandfather-grandchild relationship dysfunction was associated with two areas of growth: relating to others and appreciation of life. Perceiving the grandchild as difficult, especially among older grandfathers, was related to self-reported personal growth, supporting the theoretical notion that coping with stress is associated with perceiving oneself as strong (Taubman – Ben-Ari, Findler, & Ben Shlomo, 2011a).

Cognitive appraisals are also important in affecting the experience of growth among grandparents, as with parents. Challenge appraisals are associated with greater self-reported growth among both grandmothers (Taubman – Ben-Ari, Ben Shlomo, & Findler, 2011) and grandfathers (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2011a), suggesting that when an event is perceived positively, despite the difficulties involved, it is more likely to generate a sense of growth. However, threat appraisals were also associated with greater growth among grandmothers (Taubman – Ben-Ari, Ben Shlomo, & Findler, 2011), leaving us, so far, with a complex, unclear picture.
**Sociodemographic Variables and Internal Resources**

Gender differences were investigated in one study of grandparents’ personal growth, revealing that grandmothers reported more growth than grandfathers (Taubman – Ben-Ari, Findler, & Ben Shlomo, 2011c). Age was positively associated with growth among grandmothers (Taubman – Ben-Ari, Ben Shlomo, & Findler, 2011; Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2011c), but not grandfathers (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2011a, 2011b). Results regarding education indicate that it was inversely related to growth among new grandmothers and grandfathers (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2011c), and to four of the five growth dimensions (the exception being spiritual change) among grandfathers in another sample (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2011a).

In regard to internal resources, lower self-esteem has been found to be associated with higher growth among first-time grandmothers (Taubman – Ben-Ari, Ben Shlomo, & Findler, 2011), and with higher spiritual change among first-time grandfathers (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2011a). In line with the same reasoning, higher attachment anxiety was associated with higher growth among expectant maternal grandmothers (Ben Shlomo et al., 2010).

Being older, less educated, and sensing lower self-esteem or higher attachment anxiety are all expressions of lower personal resources, which may point to the fact that when people with fewer personal resources encounter situations in which they do not necessarily anticipate effective coping and good adjustment, they have a greater chance of discovering new aspects of their abilities and strengths.

**External Resources**

External resources also appear to play a part in grandparents’ growth. More meetings between first-time maternal grandmothers and their daughters are associated with greater reported growth among them (Taubman – Ben-Ari, Ben Shlomo, & Findler, 2011). In addition, based on the independent reports of both partners, spouse’s growth was found to
contribute to the explained variance in growth among both grandmothers and grandfathers, beyond the contribution of background variables and internal resources (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2011c). Thus, spouse's growth might represent an opportunity to share the experience of grandparenthood with a significant other, which is in line with a series of findings indicating that sharing life events with other people is associated with positive adaptation and growth (e.g., Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

**Further Insights About Growth and Thoughts For the Future**

*I’ve learned that my physical abilities are much greater than I thought; that I can handle work and family. I have more patience for other people. Everything is measured by different standards. I am less easily upset by the stresses of work and daily life. Everything seems less significant. The family and the children are more important than anything else. --Mother of 4-year-old twins, a boy and a girl*

To sum up, fewer personal resources, appraising parenthood or grandparenthood as a challenge rather than a threat, and a having more supportive environment all appear to encourage growth in new parents and grandparents, though parents do seem to report on higher growth than grandparents. It goes without saying that the transition to parenthood is a decisive turning point in a person’s life. Such a major change is likely to involve a reevaluation of priorities and reexamination of core beliefs and life philosophy. Although the transition to grandparenthood is also a very special event in an individual’s life, which may also instigate a rethinking of priorities, new insights about self and others, and a reexamination of beliefs, it is not as dramatic as the transition to parenthood. Whereas recent studies substantially expand our knowledge regarding the growth of parents and grandparents, many questions remain unanswered.

**Is Growth Solely a Subjective, Individualistic Experience, or Can It Be Shared?**

The available evidence indicates that one person’s growth can be observed by significant others (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2011a, 2011b) and is enhanced by being experienced
together with someone else. A spouse’s growth is positively associated with one’s own personal growth among grandparents (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2011c), and a similar association was found in mother-daughter pairs (Taubman – Ben-Ari, Ben Shlomo, & Findler, 2011). However, we still know little about the conditions that promote or interfere with shared personal growth.

*Is There a Developmental Pattern in Personal Growth?*

When can personal growth be detected for the first time? Does it change with time or develop? Taubman – Ben-Ari et al.’s (2009) prospective study of mothers’ personal growth during the third trimester of pregnancy and shortly after delivery, and Ben Shlomo et al.’s (2010) related study of maternal grandmothers, revealed that patterns established during pregnancy tend to foreshadow later stages of motherhood and grandmotherhood. Moreover, growth measured during pregnancy was a better predictor of growth after the birth than any of the other personal or environmental resources measured following delivery. This suggests that the critical period for personal growth and its continuation is pregnancy. Moreover, mothers, although not grandmothers, reported more growth after the birth of the child than during pregnancy. Similarly, Spielman’s (2011) longitudinal study revealed correlations between the levels of growth at the three waves of data collection, with greater growth two years after the birth of a first child than one month after the child’s delivery.

These findings suggest that, as observed in other contexts and other kinds of samples (e.g., Anderson & Lopez-Baez, 2008), the first signs of growth among parents and grandparents occur early in the process of a life transition. Moreover, once initiated, growth seems to increase with time.

*How is Growth Related to Other Positive Outcomes?*

Is growth distinct from well-being, meaning in life, positive perceptions of parenthood, and so on? Are the trajectories of growth similar to those for other positive or adaptive
outcomes? Results so far suggest that growth is a distinct construct (Ben Shlomo et al., 2010; Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). For example, during pregnancy and shortly after the birth of a first child, internal resources were associated with mental health and the perceived costs of becoming a mother, whereas cognitive appraisal of challenge and support systems were associated with a mother’s personal growth (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2009). These results also indicate that distress in the form of perceived costs (and perhaps other negative consequences as well) can coexist with growth as separate outcomes of the same event.

Similarly, among first-time mothers and fathers, growth and parental self-efficacy were associated with different variables (Spielman & Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2009), as were growth and meaning in life among both first-time mothers and grandmothers (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., Ben Shlomo, & Findler, 2011). Stable variables (self-esteem, social support) were found to be related mainly to meaning, whereas more event-specific variables (such as the perception of motherhood/ grandmotherhood as a challenge or threat) were related to growth. Hence, although meaning is often thought to be part of growth, the findings suggest that growth is generated by change and is sensitive to circumstances, whereas meaning is more stable and may be experienced continuously throughout life.

The finding that growth in the transitions to parenthood and grandparenthood is not identical to other concepts such as well-being, mental health, meaning in life, and positive emotions is consistent with results from studies of traumatic events (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). Although people who undergo a life crisis may suffer a reduction in well-being as a result, they can nevertheless grow from the experience (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2010).

**Concluding Remarks**

Our understanding of self-perceptions of personal growth is still limited. Some of the research findings are counterintuitive, such as the fact that individuals who seem to have
fewer internal resources feel they have grown the most following a stressful life event. This contrasts with what is usually found in studies of other positive outcomes, where individuals characterized by more resources tend to react more adaptively. Until research provides further insight, the interpretation of such findings must remain speculative.

Should growth during positive life transitions be encouraged? Interventions have traditionally been aimed at preventing negative emotional reactions, distress, and psychopathology. Should growth become an additional target for practitioners? Baring in mind that not everyone needs to grow from a stress-related experience, it would seem that facilitating the personal growth of new parents and grandparents may be beneficial not only for them, but also for the next generation whose care they are undertaking.
References


