

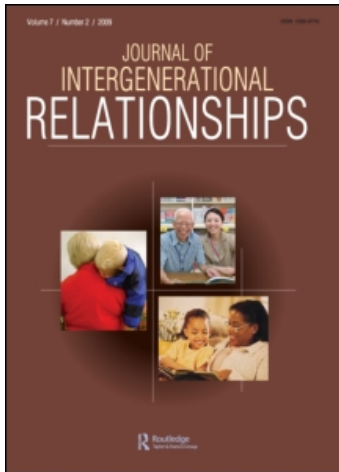
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SCHOLARLY

Research

Grandmothers as Replacement Parents and Partners: The Role of Grandmotherhood in Single Parent Families

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The increasingly important role that grandparents and, in particular, grandmothers, are playing in the lives of their children and grandchildren is now widely recognized. What is less clear is the type of role these family members play within the extended family. Drawing on an in depth study of UK lone parent families, this paper reveals that grandmothers frequently become replacement partners as well as parents. While grandparents as replacement or surrogate parents have been identified in other studies, grandparents as replacement partners have not been well recognized. Yet their role is also of importance in sustaining the lone parent and contributing to the well-being of the grandchild.

KEYWORDS *grandmothers, roles, relationships, single mothers*

INTRODUCTION

Falling fertility and mortality rates throughout the developed world have led to a dramatic aging of societies. Such demographic aging has significant implications for kinship structures and roles. In particular, the shift from a high mortality–high fertility society to a low mortality–low fertility society results in an increase in the number of living generations, or

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intergenerational extension, and in a decrease in the number of living relatives within each generation, or *intragenerational contraction* (Bengtson et al., 1990). A four-generation family structure, for example, has three tiers of parent–child relationships, two sets of grandparent–grandchild ties, and one great grandparent–grandchild linkage. Within generations of this same family, horizontally, aging individuals will have fewer siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews. Individuals, thus, increasingly have more vertical than horizontal linkages in the family and spend longer time occupying intergenerational family roles than before.

The number of individuals who will live for part of their lives as members of three and four generation families are, thus, increasing, as are the proportion of grandparents among Western populations. However, while the number of living generations will increase, the absolute number of living relatives will decrease. As a consequence, grandparenthood and its associated roles and relationships are achieving a growing prominence in contemporary Western society. U.S. data suggest that three quarters of adults will become grandparents and one third of grandparents will go on to experience great-grandparenthood and be part of four generation families (Szinovacz, 1998). UK data present a similar picture, with indications that just under a third of the UK's population are grandparents and that three quarters of the UK adult population will also attain grandparenthood (Dench, Ogg, & Thomson, 1999). Furthermore, grandparents are occupying an expanding position within the family (Roberto & Stroes, 1992, 1995). Due to demographic trends in the 1970s, when people married earlier and had more closely spaced children, individuals are currently experiencing the transition to grandparenthood at younger ages. They are, therefore, likely to occupy the position for a longer proportion of their lives, with estimates suggesting that some current adults may be grandparents for over half their lifetimes (Kornhaber & Woodward, 1997).

Recent surveys at regional and international levels have highlighted the important role that older people are playing within the European family in terms of family transfers (Harper & Leeson, 2009; Brandt, Haberkern, & Szydik, 2009; Hank, 2009; Hank & Barber, 2009). Most surveys also report a relatively high degree of contact between grandparents and grandchildren, with average physical contact occurring at least once a month, supplemented by other forms of communication (Age Concern, 1997, 1998; Arthur, Snape, & Dench, 2003; Dench et al., 1999; Leeson, 2004; Harper, 2003, 2004; Smith, 1995). Leeson (2004) reports from a longitudinal Danish study that contact between the generations has both increased and intensified in the past decade. However, the nature of the relationship supported by such contact varies widely across a spectrum (King & Elder, 1996), from sharing occasional interests and leisure activities to providing regular care.

Various roles of grandparenthood have been identified. Harper and colleagues' (2004) study of UK grandmothers identifies grandmothers as carer, replacement partner (confidante, guide, and facilitator), replacement parent

(listener, teacher, and disciplinarian) and as family anchor (transferring values, attitudes, and history). Bengtson (1985) refers to five separate symbolic functions of grandparents in the United States: being there, grandparents as national guard, family watchdogs, arbiters who perform negotiations between members, and participants in the social construction of family history.

While there has been a recent emphasis on the important role of grandfathers (Mann & Leeson, in this volume), grandmothers are still identified as the “central” grandparent (Thompson, 1999; Thompson Itzin, & Abendstern, 1990; Dench et al., 1999; Barnett, Scaramella, Neppl, Ontai, & Conger, 2010; Seponski & Lewis, 2009). Thompson and colleagues (1990) find grandchildren only ever mention grandmothers, implying that they are regarded as the single real grandparents. Similarly, Barnett and colleagues (2010) note higher quality relationships between grandmothers and their daughters than between grandfathers. This higher quality is connected with the familiar notion of women as “kin-keepers” who, as “ministers of the interior” (Hagestad, 1985, 1986) place a lot of emphasis on maintaining interpersonal and family ties. Pittman (2007) stresses the important role grandmothers play in the lives of young adolescents which, according to Kostelecky and Bass (2004), continues into adulthood. Hank and Barber (2009) emphasize that grandmothers still play a crucial role in providing child care in many European countries.

Finally, it should be noted that grandparents play an important role in relation to the rising incidence of divorce and the emergence of complex reconstituted families. Within close supportive relationships, grandparents can provide considerable stability and emotional and practical support to their children and grandchildren (Kornhaber & Woodward, 1981; Aldous, 1985; Kennedy, 1991; Kennedy & Kennedy, 1993).

Work on reconstituted families in the UK (Bornat et al., 1999; Harper et al., 2004) reports strong contact following divorce through the maternal grandmother line and limited contact via the paternal grandparent line. The somewhat limited work on the *role* of the grandparent within reconstituted or step-families (Bornat et al., 1999; Dimmock, 2002) serves to illustrate the complexity and range of such new family forms, which range from long-term marital based unions in which the stepparent (and, thus, stepgrandparents) have been in these roles since the grandchildren were very young, to brief cohabiting unions in which the grandparents have little opportunity to establish relationships with new stepgrandchildren.

METHODOLOGY

It is, thus, important to understand the roles and relationships that are emerging in the new family forms and, in particular, in lone parent families where single mothers may be particularly dependent on their own mothers, the

maternal grandmother, for support. This paper reports the findings of the qualitative component of a large mixed-methods UK study that explores the role of grandparents in providing care for the children of their lone-mother daughters (Harper et al., 2004). The study is in line with the proposal of the Tashakkori and Creswell (2007) that the research should draw inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The study identifies three case areas with contrasting labor markets, child care provision, and low income populations and undertakes both quantitative and qualitative research to explore the role of grandmothers in providing appropriate care to enable their lone-mother daughters to return to part or full time work. The study also explores the potentially conflicting demands of child care and economic employment for older women, how this conflict impacts these older women, and their perceptions of their roles in mid and late life.

Stage one of the research comprised a quantitative survey of some 800 lone mothers (861) on their relationships with their own mothers, their children's maternal grandmothers. Haringey, West Oxfordshire, and Oldham were selected to provide a cross sectional sample of mothers. Haringey, an inner city authority in North London, is characterized by significant disparities of wealth and deprivation, high levels of unemployment, and a relatively large number of minority ethnic groups, refugees, and asylum seekers. Oldham, a large metropolitan borough in the northwest of England with declining industries, high levels of unemployment, and benefit dependency, has a low percentage of minority ethnic groups. The rural district of West Oxfordshire is characterized by pockets of deprivation and rural poverty and general poor access to services. It has a self-contained labor market, a very low percentage of ethnic minorities, and fewer lone parents than the two urban populations. Lone mothers were identified using the Housing Benefit Register and surveyed by a postal questionnaire. The data collected comprises basic socioeconomic variables of socioeconomic status, education, employment, residency, income, marital status and history, parenthood, and family networks. This data provides a data of information on patterns of contact between the generations and the provision of care in the three areas.

These patterns of contact and care were then taken as a dynamic process matrix from which to sample the qualitative component, stage two of the research, in which 32 families were selected for in-depth analysis to illustrate both the characteristics and relationships of the multigenerational families in the wider survey. Two thirds of these participants are White British and one third is from an ethnic minority (Afro-Caribbean/Indian/Filipino/Greek-Cypriot). The grandmothers are aged between 44 and 73 years old. Fifty percent of the grandmothers were still married at the time of the interview, and the other half was divorced, separated, or widowed. The numbers of grandchildren varies between ages 1 and 11, with an average of 4. Lone mother ages are between 15 and

44 years old. Two thirds were single never married the other third were divorced. The number of children that lone mothers have is between 1 and 5, with an average of 2 to 3.

Using the funnel approach (Harper & La Fontaine, 2009), extensive interviewing of both the lone mothers and their own mothers (the grandmothers) was undertaken. This interview process proceeded on the basis of a flexible interview schedule that provided the broad content areas to be addressed. It is particularly suitable in instances in which the respondents may not have a sufficiently common vocabulary or grasp of common vocabulary to enable the formulation of questions that have the same meaning for all of them. The interviewer used the guide to ensure full coverage of the themes and specific hypothesis-driven questions under research. A funnel sequence was employed whereby each successive question is related to the previous question but has a progressively narrower scope. The interviewer, thus, guided the respondent through the interview, probing and requesting additional information until satisfied that each domain had been covered to the best of the respondent's ability and/or knowledge and that the hypothesis-driven questions had been answered. The semistructured interview, thus, retains the strengths of qualitative methodologies, permitting the researcher to obtain details of relevant data not previously perceived to be of importance while satisfying the validity and representative requirements of a random survey. This method also ensures data quality because the interviewer is alert to inconsistencies and omissions of data and can provide or obtain additional information that may be needed to clarify a particular question or response. The interviews have been analyzed using the technique advocated by Harper (2004) that entails first level identification of significant statements, second level exploration of meanings of statements, and third level development of themes of meaning. In addition, use of vignettes and narrative segments has been employed to further explore relevant thematic relationships. One of the key thematics to emerge from this qualitative component is the positioning of the grandmother in relation to her daughter and the consequent roles that are adopted within this relationship. It is this question to which we shall now turn.

RESULTS

Surrogate Roles

The qualitative research reveals that, often, grandmothers tend to incorporate one of two main roles: the role of a replacement parent or of a replacement partner. While grandparents as replacement or surrogate parents have already been reported elsewhere (Minkler & Roe, 1996), grandparents as replacement partners are less well recognized. There is a key difference here in that replacement partners tend to focus on satisfying the needs of

the grandchildren, as in a parent–child relationship and replacement partners aim to satisfy the needs of the lone mother, as in an adult union relationship.

Significant ethnic differences are found in that aspect, as the role of the replacement parent is found to be much more often distributed among the Black-Caribbean population, and the role of the replacement partner is found to be much more intrinsic to the White-British population. These differences could be explained through the previously stated difference in the primary object of focus between the two ethnic groups. The existing normative views and beliefs within the White-British population predetermine the placement of the main accent of grandparental interest on the needs of their own children and the consecutive incorporation of the role of the replacement partner in order to cover up for the main missing structure in the life of the lone mothers. The existing pattern within the Black-Caribbean population to take as a primary object of focus the needs of the grandchildren is the mechanism that explains their incorporation of the role of the replacement parent, trying to cover up for the missing structures in the lives of the grandchildren. A note should be made, though, that despite the general trend of ethnicity-based role division, there is, of course, a distribution of both of these roles within all the ethnic groups.

REPLACEMENT PARTNER

The role of emotional supporter and listener often automatically transforms the grandmother into surrogate partners from the point of view of the lone mothers as, thus, the grandmothers now cover needs that would otherwise be directed toward the partners, such as practical worries about the family, the daily chores, about problem with the children, etc.

I think the things that I talk to my mom about are things that I should be really talking to my kids' dad about.

But my mum is like my partner. My mum does things what my partner would have done, I suppose.

She's like their father when I think about it now, when I think about it like that.

Interestingly, many grandmothers themselves do not express self-awareness of their substitution for the missing partner, most probably as they associate their practices of support to their children as part of their parent responsibilities, as an element of the parent–child relationship. They generally do express awareness of their replacement role of the missing

parent, though, an awareness that, according to them, is intrinsic to the grandchildren as well.

There is a different bond between us because she hasn't got a dad, even though she knows about her dad and, yeah, she knows that we're taking that other part, the role of replacement, then, of her dad.

This different type of bond or role replacement affects both the grandchildren and the grandparents, often making the grandmother feel her grandchild as her own child. Interviewees often share feeling a much bigger sense of responsibility toward their lone daughters' children, stemming exactly from their self-awareness that they have to combine both the role of grandparents and of the missing parents.

This attitude becomes most obvious through the case of a grandmother who provides care for both her lone mothering and her married daughters' children. Despite *de facto* being actively involved with both of her grandchildren, this grandmother refers to her taking care of her married daughter's son as an actual child minding job "because I know that I've got to be here at certain times and you know, it is a little complicated," and accepts a small nominal payment. Alternatively, she is strongly involved with the care for her fatherless granddaughter on a completely voluntary basis and refers to that as something stemming out of her own feeling of responsibility and duty. This grandmother, though not distinguishing between grandchildren in terms of grandparental feelings, reveals that different attitudes toward both of them, spoiling and indulging her lone-mothering daughter's child much more than her married daughter's child, as she feels she needs to compensate the lack of a father and, thus, to fill in this emotional gap, providing her granddaughter the security of being loved and taken care of.

In a few cases, this concept of responsibility is reported to be highly stressful, as the grandmothers feel unable to build a grandparental role according to their expectations, being too involved with the role of the replacement partner. Therefore, these additional role expectations hamper grandmothers' own developmental tasks.

The deriving role confusion and inability to build roles in accordance with one's own expectations is, in certain cases, found to be stressful not only for the grandmothers but for the lone mothers as well. They often share experiencing feelings of guilt for taking over that much of their mothers' time and life by enforcing them to take another role and another set of responsibilities and, due to the fact that "I don't think Mum could have said no, even if she wanted to. So yeah, there is—I'm trying to back off now, as much as I can, to be able to give them, cause Mum's got her parents and Dad's got his Mum, so they're running between the two of them as well as me." Although, generally, lone mothers state that the relationship with their

own mothers has improved since the birth of their children, one expresses that it has deteriorated as a consequence from her moods and problems due to “unnecessary pressures and strains.”

She’s been my kicking boy. She’s been the one that I’ve yelled and screamed at on the phone and she’s also lifted me up when I’ve been at the rock bottom. . . . I think we’ve had a lot of arguments because of stress which I feel has damaged our relationship.

REPLACEMENT PARENT

The grandparental role as replacement parent is found to be highly appreciated and strongly desired by the lone mothers. Grandmothers often adopt this role for a specific period of time due to special circumstances and after that period return to a more secondary role. For example, a popular view among the Black-Caribbean sample is that if the daughter is capable of performing the role of the main and only active parent, grandparenting practices should be sporadic, only when convenient for the grandmother. In case of inability of the daughter to fulfill her role as a parent (e.g., during sickness), the grandmother completely takes over the role of the mother and becomes a replacement parent. Once the daughter is capable of taking back her responsibility, the grandmother shifts back to her initial grandparenting role practices.

An important aspect of the replacement parent role, for example, is the grandmother as discipline figures. Lone mothers place significant importance on the help their parents provide in the actual bringing up of the children and especially in disciplining them and telling them off.

They’ll help me discipline them. And they don’t listen to me very much, but it’s having somebody there to back me up. Which is immensely useful . . . ’cause not having him here um, and being the disciplinarian, the sole disciplinarian, is very difficult to actually get them to take notice of me. It’s like, “Mum, you should be the nice person.” And I seem to be the bad person all the time and that’s really difficult. I want to be there to help them, and to do the fun things with them. But I can’t. So, Mum and Dad help that way.

This reported phenomenon, which has been discovered mainly through the interviews of the White-British sample, is a direct controversy to Cherlin and Furstenberg’s (1986) “non-interference norm,” which suggests that non-interference in the lives of adult children and their children is a key concept for grandparents. It is possible that the previously mentioned norm is not valid for lone mothers, as they need and value the existence of a second adult opinion or approach rather than accepting it as imposing and

threatening their own parental role and authority. They appreciate and in certain cases even actively search for the figure of an adult they can fall back on.

My Mum has become like a surrogate father to them and this is really good. Familiarity definitely breeds contempt and I can tell them not to do something until I am blue in the face and they won't do it, but if somebody else tells them for a change then definitely it makes a difference.

Importance of Surrogacy

Both roles are of intrinsic importance not only for the lone mothers but for the grandmother as well. It is well known that grandparenthood is sometimes not only an important part of life and of the ego-identity but is a substitute for the losses grandmothers have already experienced or are currently experiencing in their lives, such as dealing with new life structures (e.g., the empty nest), social isolation, separation from/loss of partner, etc. Thus the responsibilities as grandmothers and, moreover, the intensified grandparental involvement, applies in both of these roles; the increased sense of emotional bond and family belongingness as well as the feeling of someone depending on you and providing unconditional love to you can often be of substantial meaning in life. Therefore, in a sense, in certain cases, the grandchildren and the lone-parenting children can themselves have the role of a "replacement partner," and a "replacement family" for the grandmothers. That reciprocity could also be one reason why relationships between daughters/lone mothers and mothers often improve after the birth of grandchildren. Interviewees state that the relationship "strengthens" because of the awareness of all family members involved that they have only one another and that this relationship is of equal importance for both sides and is a ground for reciprocal support.

There's no grudges held or anything like that because we can't—basically we need each other, my mum needs me and the kids for company and I need my mum to help me. So we need each other, so we've got to stick together.

Besides the subjective, psychological value that both lone mothers and grandmothers place on the grandparental roles as replacement parents and replacement partners, it might be that there are also relationship dynamics that could be causing and encouraging their incorporation. Often, the changes in family and life structure, the stress surrounding these changes, and the desire for all additional tensions to be avoided in order to build a stable new structure of family relationships enforce the incorporation

of new behavioral patterns and attitudes. Such new patterns of behavior on the side of the actively involved grandmothers that became apparent in this study are, for example, the practice to simply offer or to straightaway provide certain support rather than to wait to be asked for it in advance, as they acknowledge having to ask for help will be highly uncomfortable for the mothers and will enforce time and organizational constraints.

Well, she knows that I am here, I mean I don't want her to feel that she has to feel she needs me. I want her to be independent but know that if she needs anything then I am here.

But because we [she and her daughter] have a good setup, I enjoy it and she enjoys him [her grandchild] coming here, so . . . that's why it works. Its not just purely a practical thing, that the only person available is me, so its quite nice that its more of a choice than it was going back then . . .

In this case, the desire to disassociate oneself from the parental image allows the opportunity to achieve other positive feedback about the self, which has more of characteristics of personal evaluation and attitude rather than of a reflection of parent-child hierarchical positioning.

Disruptive Effects

Despite the numerous benefits and positive sides of the aforementioned grandparental roles as well as the various processes facilitating their incorporation, these roles can also have a significantly disruptive effect on the relationship between grandmothers and lone mothers if not negotiated and not desired by both sides. This research shows that the events and roles in life from a personal rather than from a social character are more problematic for the grandmothers themselves as well as for the families as a whole. Conflicts of external character, such as conflict with occupational roles, other social responsibilities, etc., are, in most cases, found to be less disruptive than those of internal nature, such as inability to build the grandparenting role in accordance with their intrinsic role expectations, inability to build an adequate reflection-image and the subsequent lack of clarity of one's rights and responsibilities, discrepancy between the desired and the actual character of the parent-child relationship, etc. In this sense, some grandmothers find the two roles too imposing, as they don't fit into their grandparental role expectations. The inability to fulfill the grandparenthood dream or to build the desired grandparenthood identity could be very stressful and painful for the grandmothers; sometimes, if grandmothers are deprived of that opportunity, the identity suffers a significant crisis. In such cases, grandmothers share being lost in what role to follow. An

eloquent example of such is a grandmother who shares feelings lost after starting to live with her grandchildren and subsequently not being able to distinguish between the grandmother role and the surrogate parent role anymore.

This role confusion affects grandmothers' abilities to form expectations of rights and responsibilities and does not allow them to feel a stable family structure. Some of the interviewees, both grandmothers and lone mothers, share that they experience significant difficulties in those terms, coming from problems such as establishing house regulations for the two sets of families when living together, respecting the personal space, respecting the power exchanges, and establishing a valid new family structure hierarchy and authority. All of these difficulties result from the change of parental to partnerlike relationships and resemble the period of initial character fitting typical for all partners. After starting to live with her grandchildren, a grandmother commented,

It's going to be one family, you know? And we are the grandparents! Whereas now you feel that you are one family? Yeah, you feel now it's like—you are starting your family again.

Another one discusses the difficulties regarding her building of a role perception, after her daughter's family broke down and she became much more involved with providing care for the grandchildren.

Now you start to feel them, you know, you try to be a parent or somewhat. . . .

Not only grandmothers can suffer from a structural or role disruption, but so can the lone mothers themselves. Authority- and role-based conflicts may easily arise when there is a confusion of roles, such as when mothers co-reside with their own parents and, therefore, have to be themselves both children and parents simultaneously or when space of influence is not negotiated.

Yeah I feel like, because I am his mum, I feel like when I say something then it should be my word that goes. But because my mum is my mum, she has none of it, she says, "No it's my house, it's my rules. . . ."

Lone mothers feel lost and overwhelmed under the pressure of their parental authority and their own responsibilities as children and, sometimes, struggle with keeping the roles as they would like them to be. Under such circumstances and inner tensions, the attempts of grandmothers to take the role of replacement partner or replacement parent can be met with a strong

resistance from the lone parent and can have a strong disruptive effect on the overall relationship. Lone parent interviewees report many examples of such difficulties they have experienced, such as having trouble with building a motherly figure under the competition of the grandmother, who wants to be a second mom, having to fight their own father on his desire to take the parental figure over their children and to push him back into his grandfather role, etc.

Therefore, an important factor in the mother–grandmother relationship is the grandparental acceptance of her role and lack of attempts to take over the parental role, unless so desired by the lone mother herself. Many grandmothers, though, express their awareness of the importance of that fact as well as their own view that it is morally right to keep the balance between caring and being involved, and they ought not overtake the main rights and leading role of their young parenting children.

I believe in people making their own decisions in life, not somebody else—so that was how it went. . . . I wouldn't impose anything on her, because she had to have her choice.

We didn't take over the role of 'this is our child sort of thing.' It was we always made it clear that it was Clare's child. . . . You know like somebody coming in—it wasn't like we had a baby; it was still Clare's baby but it was part of us as well. We took it on board and got a lot of enjoyment out of it.

Therefore, these grandmothers value the importance of giving their children the freedom to make their own choices in life such as their roles, their parental styles, etc.

Significant cross-cultural differences, though, are found in this respect between the two group samples that could be explained through the pre-existing cultural differences previously discussed. As representatives of the Black sample generally have different expectations and perceptions of the grandparental role, they respond differently to the occurring changes in the life structures, such as starting to live with their lone-parenting child and their grandchildren, which were found less disruptive than in the White-British sample.

Because, as I said, we're a family. More so with our people who like to have children around and it didn't matter, you just have your children and this is where they are supposed to be, so they stay here.

These same changes are also found to be not disruptive for the parental role expectations or well-being of the Black lone mothers, which could be explained through their awareness that their mothers are not accepting these

new practices as hampering their life structures. Furthermore, lone mothers feel comfortable with this settlement as they view it simply as a continuation of their roles as children to their parents and, thus, do not experience a threat to their parental role.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Overall, despite possible existing conflicts, grandmothers in general are found to be important stress reducers, either through emotional support or through practical intervention and support, to their lone mother daughters. Both roles, that of replacement parent and partner, seem to be of significant importance for the lone mothers as the motivation for this arrangement seems to be twofold. On one hand, these changing roles derive from the subjective experience of missing structures in their own lives (being a single parent and being without a partner) and, on the other, from the feelings they experience due to the missing structures in their children's lives.

Lone mothers value their children's relationships with their grandparents in a stronger and more special way as they feel their children are anyway deprived of family structure and usually not only have one parent but have only half a family tree, being in touch mainly with their mother's family. In the same sense, it is important for them to feel that grandparenting is a significantly valued construct for their parents, that there is an established emotional bond between their children and their parents. When asked how they view their mothers' grandparenting, most interviewees state they view it as a role of being both a mother to them and a grandmother to their grandchildren and that both of these relationship connections are giving equal motivation for their grandparenting behavior. It seems important for mothers to feel that grandparenting is more than simply a new form of parenting and parental support. It is a relationship with equal importance and significance for all of the family members; it is a network for mutual support, which increases the well-being of all involved.

Therefore, it can be concluded that both of these grandparental roles of parent and partner are welcomed by the lone mothers because they ease the feelings of guilt regarding imposing undesired responsibilities of care on the grandmothers. At the same time, these roles decrease the feelings of life failure and dependency by making the grandparental involvement a construct autonomous from the lone mothers themselves and resulting from the grandmothers' own feelings of responsibility toward, or pleasure from, their grandchildren. Indeed, this feeling is an intrinsic characteristic of both parental and partnering relationships.

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