**Adult grandchildren’s perspectives on the grandparent- grandchild relationship from childhood to adulthood.**

Relationships across more than two generations are becoming increasingly important to individuals and families in modern societies as they provide a source of wellbeing and support over the course of people’s lives (Buchanan & Rotkirch, 2018). Significant demographic changes in the USA, as in most industrialized societies, such as increases in longevity of family members, decreases in fertility together with the increase in divorce rates and in the number of children living in single-parent households, have contributed to make grandparents more important than ever as a resource for the wellbeing of younger generations in the family (Bengston, 2001). Moreover with increased maternal employment, grandparents have the potential to play a more significant role in the lives of their grandchildren (Buchanan & Rotkirch, 2018; Dunifon, 2013; Griggs, Tan, Buchanan, Attar-Schwartz & Flouri, 2010).

In the United Kingdom, it is expected that, by 2044, those aged 65 and over will represent 25% of the total population (Office for National Statistics, 2014). Leeson (2018) states that never before have so many elderly people survived to old age. While life expectancy at birth has increased regularly for centuries, life expectancy at age 65 started to increase only in the twentieth century (Buchanan & Rotkirch, 2018). These demographic changes contribute to a greater involvement of grandparents. In the UK over nine million grandparents make up the UK’s ‘Grandparent Army’ with nearly three million providing very regular childcare (International Longevity Centre, 2017). According to this report, grandparents spend an average of over 8 hours a week looking after their grandchildren: this time commitment rises to over 11 hours weekly for those core grandparents who are most heavily relied upon. Moreover, two-thirds of grandparents offer financial contributions to their grandchildren’s upbringing, with payments towards clothes, toys and hobbies, leisure activities and pocket money (International Longevity Centre, 2017). The increasing involvement of grandparents in childcare is not only present in the UK but across Europe. Using data from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), Glaser, Price, Ribe, di Gess, and Tinker (2013) found that 44% of grandmothers gave regular or occasional help looking after grandchildren, and 42% of grandfathers played a similar role. This study also showed differences across European countries: grandparents were less often responsible for day care in Northern Europe, where structured childcare is more available and affordable. In Southern Europe, where state subsidised childcare is more limited, grandparents played a major role looking after grandchildren while their parents worked.

Research on grandparenthood has shown that the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren is usually quite close and satisfying for both generations, although grandparents’ conceptualizations of intergenerational relationships show some conflictual elements (von Humboltd, Monteiro & Leal, 2018). Grandparents reported ambivalent feelings in relation to providing childcare: they expressed feelings of joy and satisfaction while indicating that giving support to grandchildren might be quite demanding for grandparents (von Humboltd, Monteiro & Leal, 2018). The literature has identified several variables that may influence the quality of intergenerational relationships between grandparents and grandchildren. One significant factor is geographical distance between them: this was a key predictor of the quality of grandparent- grandchild relationships as reported by adolescent grandchildren (Dunifon & Bajracharya, 2012). The quality of parent-grandparent relationship also played a significant role, suggesting that parents may act as important gatekeepers between grandparents and grandchildren (Dunifon & Bajracharya, 2012). Geographical distance may facilitate frequency of contacts between the two generations. Grandchildren reported being close to grandparents with whom they had more frequent contacts (Davey, Savla, Janke & Anderson, 2009). Other variables that may have an effect on the relationship are gender, lineage, and age of grandparent and grandchild. Maternal grandmothers tend to have more frequent contact and greater involvement with their grandchildren. Investigating the nature and frequency of contacts between grandparents and grandchildren in different European countries (United Kingdom, Italy and Greece), Sciplino and Smith (2015) found that grandchildren’s contact with maternal grandmother was significantly greater than contact with any other type of grandparent. Using data from Growing Up in Scotland survey (GUS) and qualitative in-depth interviews, Jamieson, Ribe and Warner (2018) confirmed the established finding that maternal grandmothers are the most heavily involved grandparents despite changes in families’ structure and increasing gender equality. Grandfathers too tend to be involved in the care of their grandchildren, especially if they are maternal grandfathers, live nearby and are in good health (Bates, Taylor & Stanfield, 2018).

Grandparent and grandchild ages are related to the frequency of contacts between them and to the quality of their relationship. Younger grandparents reported seeing their grandchildren significantly more than older ones did and younger children saw their grandparents significantly more than older children did (Sciplino & Smith, 2015). Grandparents who are younger and have younger grandchildren showed the most positive intergenerational relationships (Davey, Savla, Janke & Anderson, 2009; Dunifon & Bajracharya, 2012). Frequency of contacts tends to decline once a grandchild reaches early adulthood as older grandchildren are less likely to be still residing in their parent’s home (Geurts, Poortman, Tilburg & Dykstra, 2009). Geurts and colleagues (2009) found that living at home with parents was associated with a higher frequency of contacts with grandparents suggesting that the decrease in contact might relate to having less convenient opportunities.

The grandparent-grandchild relationship can be beneficial for grandchildren, as families become less traditional and grandparents may take the role of main carers of their grandchildren (Backhouse & Graham, 2012; Connor, 2006; Poehlmann, 2003) or may support grandchildren through family adjustments (Attar-Schwartz, Tan, Buchanan, Flouri & Griggs (2009). Attar-Schwartz and colleagues (2009) investigated the grandparent-grandchild relationship with adolescent participants from two-parent biological families, lone parent and stepfamilies. The results showed that greater grandparent involvement was associated with fewer emotional difficulties and with more prosocial behaviour among all sample. Moreover, grandparent involvement was more strongly associated with reduced adjustment difficulties among adolescents from lone parent or stepfamilies than those from two-parent biological families. This suggests that grandparents’ involvement may have a greater role with children living with only one parent or with step-parents. More recently, the findings from two studies in the UK and Israel (Attar-Schwartz & Buchanan, 2018) showed that grandparents are highly involved in adolescents’ lives and that this involvement is associated with increased adolescent well-being.

The relationship with grandchildren can also have a positive impact for grandparents. Grandparents reported that the best part of being grandparents was the sharing of mutual affection with their grandchildren, and sharing activities together (Mansson, 2016; Clarke & Roberts, 2004). A qualitative study of grandparents in New Zeland (Breheny, Stephens & Spilsbury, 2013) has also highlighted the positive aspects of the relationships with grandchildren constructed as demonstrations of involvement without crossing boundaries into interference. Grandparents described the relationships as based on caring and companionship but also showed awareness of monitoring and balancing their level of interaction to not interfere in their grandchildren’s lives (Breheny, Stephens & Spilsbury, 2013).

Grandparent-grandchild relationships are also important later in life when the grandchild has reached adulthood: these relationships can still have a positive impact for both generations. Grandparents can have their grandchildren as part of their support network. A longitudinal study in the Netherlands, examining the grandparent-grandchild relationship from the perspective of grandparents, found that one out of four grandparents identified at least one adult grandchild in their personal network (Geurts, Van Tilburg & Poortman, 2012). Adult grandchildren who had a strong relationship with their grandparents in childhood were more often in the grandparents’ network than other grandchildren (Guerts et al., 2012). This suggests that strong relationships during childhood provide continuation of the relationship into adulthood and might be of benefit for the grandparent. A close and positive grandparent-grandchild relationship could also be a source of support for the adult grandchild. Monserud (2011) holds that when adult grandchildren are going through certain life experiences such as divorce, or becoming parents, closeness with grandparents increases. Grandparents may also be part of their grandchildren’s support network in adulthood. As family set ups increasingly change grandparents can be one of the most consistent relationship in an adult grandchild’s life (Ruiz & Silverstone, 2007). This shows that, as the relationship transitions from childhood to adulthood and changes in family set ups occur, a good relationship with grandparents can continue and can have potential benefits for the grandchild.

Mansson, Floyd and Soliz, (2017) identified the importance of earlier positive relationships with grandparents for later relationships. Investigating the grandparent-grandchild relationship from the perspective of the adult grandchild, Mansson and colleagues (2017) found a positive association between the affection received from grandparents and the grandchildren’s perceptions of their grandparents and of their relationship. This study focused on three important aspects of the quality of the grandparent-grandchild relationship: grandchildren’s emotional closeness to their grandparents, grandparent-grandchild shared family identity, and perceived availability of social support. Therefore, a close and positive grandparent-grandchild relationship could affect how emotionally close adult grandchildren feel towards their grandparents, how they share family identity and how they see their grandparents as source of support (Mansson et al., 2017). The evidence discussed shows how significant grandparent-grandchild relationships are for both generations at different times in life and how they may influence other family relations.

Research on intergenerational relationships has highlighted important aspects. The quality of intergenerational relationships continues from childhood to adulthood (Kemp 2005), despite a decrease in frequency of contacts (Guerts, 2009). A strong relationship during childhood is related to a good relationship in adulthood (Mansson et al., 2017) and is beneficial for the grandparent (Guerts et al., 2012) and for the adult grandchild (Monserud 2011; Ruiz & Silverstone, 2007). Previous studies have focused on grandparents’ perspectives (Breheny et al., 2013; Clarke & Roberts, 2004; Guerts, 2009; Mansson, 2016; von Humboltd, Monteiro & Leal, 2018) and on infant or adolescent grandchildren’s perspectives (Attar-Schwartz et al., 2009a, 2009b; Attar-Schwartz & Buchanan, 2018; Taylor, Robila, & Lee, 2005). By contrast, some research has examined the perspectives of adult grandchildren and their relationships with their grandparents using quantitative data from surveys or questionnaires (Mansson, et al., 2017; Guerts et al., 2012; Monserud, 2011). Overall a large part of previous research in the area of intergenerational relationships has used quantitative data from surveys or questionnaires (Attar-Schwartz, Tan & Buchanan, 2009; Dunne & Ketter, 2008; Mayne & Motel- Klingebiel, 2012; Pusateri, Roache & Kam, 2016). A few qualitative studies have investigated the relationship from the grandparents’ perspective (Breheny, et al., 2013; Clarke & Roberts, 2004; Mansson, 2016) but not from the adult grandchild’s perspective.

The goal of the current study is to investigate the grandchild-grandparent relationship from the perspective of the adult grandchild, and to examine how the relationship is perceived to change over time from childhood to adulthood. The study uses a qualitative approach to get a deeper understanding of the transition of this relationship by asking adult grandchildren about their experiences and exploring the perceived factors that might be involved in shaping how the relationship transitions from childhood to adulthood.

**Method**

## **Participants**

Ten participants, 9 females and 1 male were recruited for the study using opportunity sampling. Out of the 10 participants, 8 were university students at St Mary’s University in London. The age of participants ranged from 20 to 24 years with an average age of 22. All participants were required to have a relationship with at least one living grandparent.

## **Materials**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted: 20 primary questions, mainly open-ended questions, were asked to encourage lengthy and detailed responses from participants. A small number of closed questions were also asked to gain useful background information such as the amount of contact grandchildren had with their grandparents. This information was useful for making comparisons between childhood and adulthood and prompting follow up questions such as “Why do you think this is the case?” Such prompt questions were used, where appropriate, to gain further insight by encouraging participants to reflect and expand on their responses in the interview. The primary questions of the interview schedule were drawn from previous research examining grandchild-grandparent relationships (Guerts et al., 2012; Kemp, 2005; Taylor et al., 2005). Factors such as contact and support were identified in these studies as influential in intergenerational relationships, therefore the following questions were included “How do you make contact with your grandparents?” “Is there anything that you or your grandparents help or support each other with?” Participants’ responses enabled the researcher to find out how the relationship transitions from childhood to adulthood from the adult grandchild’s perspective. The 20 questions were divided into two sections: the first section asked the participant about the current relationship with the grandparent; the second section asked the participant about the relationship with the grandparent in childhood to enable comparisons to be made. The first section consisted of nine questions on contact, lineage, emotional attachment, support and involvement such as “As an adult how involved would you say your grandparents are with your life?” These nine questions were then repeated in the second section to ask about the relationship in childhood, for example “How did you make contact with your grandparents as a child?” There were also two additional questions, one at the beginning and one at the end of the interview, not belonging to either section. The opening question asked participants whether they had a relationship with their grandparents currently and in their childhood. The final question asked participants whether and how they thought the relationship had changed from childhood to adulthood (“How do you feel your relationship with your grandparents has changed as an adult compared to when you were a child?”). All interviews were recorded using a mobile phone in a quiet room, with no one but the researcher and the participant present.

## **Procedure**

After receiving ethical approval from the Ethics Committee at St Mary’s University data collection started. Consent was obtained from the participants by asking them to complete a consent form after reading a provided information sheet explaining the nature and purpose of the study. Each participant was then interviewed in a quiet room and debriefed once the interview was completed. A paper copy of the debrief was given to the participants to answer any questions they had about the study such as what would be done with the data collected or what the purpose of the study was. The interviews were voice recorded using a mobile phone, with the average duration being 14 minutes long. Each one was then transcribed into a word document using line numbers so that participant’s comments could easily be referred to. Once an interview had been transcribed into the word document data analysis began. An additional participant would then be recruited by opportunity sampling; this procedure continued until saturation in the coding had been reached and nothing new was emerging.

## **Data Analysis**

The study collected qualitative data and a grounded theory approach of analysis was followed. A semi-structured interview was used to research grandchild- grandparent relationships, specifically the transition from childhood to adulthood from the perspective of adult grandchildren. Grounded theory analysis can be used to produce a theory explaining the topic without bias from previous research (Hussein, Hirst, Salyers & Ouiji, 2014). An interview design allows the researcher to get a more in-depth understanding of a topic by asking participants about their personal experiences. This research process provides an alternative contribution to studies using quantitative data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006).

A grounded theory approach of analysis was followed. The data from the interviews were coded and analysed following a three stages process (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). First open coding was used: the interview transcripts were read and concepts were annotated in the data (codes). Axial coding was then used: codes were grouped into categories based on relationships and patterns within and among the categories identified. Finally selective coding was carried out: the final or core categories were established and defined by different subcategories. Notes and memos were made at every stage of the analysis process to capture relevant relationships or useful points in the data. This process enabled the researcher to uncover what theory was emerging from the data in regards to answering the research question. The final part of this procedure was then to contact participants for respondent verification. The findings of the analysis were communicated to the participants in order to ensure that their responses to the interview questions were not misunderstood and that they were in agreement with the interpretation of the researcher. The researcher’s interpretation was verified by the participants.

Grounded theory analysis was chosen for this study as it enabled the researcher to investigate the topic and produce more deep and meaningful findings (DiCicco-Bloom, et al., 2006). It is also the most commonly used qualitative method of research in family studies (La Rossa 2005) that allows the researcher to develop a theory on a topic grounded in the data (Engward, 2013; Kennedy & Lingard, 2006; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007; Urqhart, Lehmann & Myers, 2010). Moreover it is used to see what emerges from the data without bias from previous research (Thornberg, 2012).

**Results**

**The grandchild-grandparent relationship in adulthood**

The analysis of the relationship with grandparents in adulthood identified three categories: Financial support, Contact (telephone or internet) and Appreciation. Financial support (7 out of 10 participants) was suggested as a primary way in which grandparents helped or supported grandchildren now as adults: “My Bajan grandparents took me to Barbados...it’s more financial on that side” from participant 4ACB. The ability to provide financial support was not affected by the increased geographical distance and decreased contact since childhood. In addition, needs were discussed as having changed. The grandchildren no longer required practical support such as caregiving but instead had financial responsibilities that grandparents contributed towards, “even though I don’t see her as much, she always sends me money for things that I need to help me out”, from participant 9ZK.

An additional category found commonly in the relationship in adulthood was that of telephone or online contact rather than face to face contact “with my Irish grandparents it’s more on the phone.” from participant 4ACB. This again can be explained by the increased distance since childhood, or the time restraints and priorities as an adult with additional responsibilities (5 out of 10 participants).

Appreciation (7 out of 10 participants) was a further category found when discussing the relationship in adulthood. Participants discussed how being an adult created a change in how they felt towards their grandparents. Participants reported a greater appreciation for the relationship in adulthood, which was explained by the deeper understanding and respect for the concept of family and the value of it. Participant 5AB said “I appreciate spending time with them and there’s always that level of respect for them because they were my parents’ parents”. Coding revealed the grandparent-grandchild relationship in adulthood to be characterised by factors such as Financial support, Contact (telephone or internet) and Appreciation. These categories were later analysed for how they fitted into broader categories.

### **The grandchild-grandparent relationship in childhood**

The analysis of the relationship with grandparents in childhood identified three categories: Caregiving, Contact (face to face) and Feelings of excitement. Many of the participants (8 out of 10 participants) reported being cared for by their grandparents when they were younger. Caregiving was defined in terms of how grandparents would help with childcare whilst parents would have work demands “she looked after me especially when I was younger when my mum was at work” from participant 6DL. Caregiving also included the grandparent’s enjoyment at being involved in looking after the grandchild. “He would look after us a lot just because he loved it, he would do anything to look after us it was quite sweet” from participant 3ST.

In childhood contact was predominantly face to face (9 out of 10 participants). “It was mostly visits when I was a child” from participant 3ST. One reason for this was that the grandparent looked after the grandchild, “I probably had more contact because my grandad used to babysit me” from participant 2CR. Another reason for contact was family gatherings or special occasions: participants reported seeing their grandparents at such events, but these were not frequently attended in adulthood.

Many participants described the feeling of seeing their grandparents as exciting (7 out of 10 participants). This was explained by the fact that they might have associated seeing their grandparents as children with pleasant activities or events such as being treated or having a change in routine or going on holiday. “I don’t know if I was excited to spend time with my grandparents or I was more excited to be going to Ireland because here I ...” from participant 4ACB. The analysis revealed the grandparent-grandchild relationship in childhood to be characterised by Caregiving, Contact (face to face) and Feelings of excitement. These categories, as well as those found from analysing the relationship in adulthood, were later combined into broader categories.

**The transition in the grandchild-grandparent relationship: Core categories**

The next stage of the analysis process was to combine the identified categories into core or higher categories and subcategories. This helped to answer the research question by highlighting the main factors involved in how the relationship transitioned from childhood to adulthood. The three higher categories established from the final stage of the analysis were Support, Contact and Attitude/Emotion.

**Support**

The first core category found was Support defined in terms of how grandparents helped the adult grandchildren or how grandchildren helped their grandparents. Support was expressed with the related subcategories of practical support, emotional support and needs which show how the relationship transitioned from childhood to adulthood. The type of support grandchildren gave or received in childhood and in adulthood was related to the needs of the two generations at different stages. “I don’t really need her to do anything for me now, I can take care of myself, but she gives me money” from participant 9ZK. In childhood practical support was needed in the form of caregiving or help with education (8 out of 10 participants), whilst in adulthood the practical support needed was financial, as well as emotional support “She supports me emotionally because I get stressed and anxious quite a lot” from participant 6DL. Moreover, the support received by the grandchild was more reciprocated in adulthood than in childhood (6 out of 10 participants), according to the needs and capabilities of both parties. One participant discussing the relationship in childhood said “they (grandparents) would take care of us and take us to places…I can’t think of anything I did for them they could take care of themselves they didn’t need me” (participant 10GP). However, in adulthood support changes, showing how the grandchild supports the grandparent. One participant said:

“I will support him I’ll go with him to hospital, or I’ll go and buy him stuff and bring it up to him, stuff like that. I have also stayed at his house when he had just come out of hospital. He needs more support than I do” (participant 3ST).

### **Contact**

The second core category to emerge from the analysis was Contact, which referred to how participants made contact with their grandparents. Contact was defined by the following subcategories: type of contact, frequency of contacts and motivation for contact. These subcategories illustrate how contact with their grandparents changed from childhood to adulthood. Table 1 shows the type and frequency of contacts between grandchildren and grandparents in adulthood and childhood. In childhood contact was mainly face to face and more frequent than in adulthood, whereas in adulthood contact was less frequent and mostly by telephone.

Motivation for contact also changed from childhood to adulthood. In childhood contact was commonly motivated by parental influence arranging family gatherings, encouraging the grandchildren to make contact, or having them be cared for by their grandparents (8 out of 10 participants). This shows how the category of Contact links to that of Support, as receiving support in the form of caregiving was one motivation for contact in childhood. Whilst in adulthood providing support was reported to be one motivation for contact as well as commitment and enjoyment “I think we kind of put in the effort. We all get along because we don’t see each other very often” from participant 10GP.

### **Attitude and Emotion**

The final core category to emerge from the analysis was Attitude and Emotion, which referred to how participants felt about their grandparents and about spending time with them. This core category was defined by the subcategories of positive and negative attitudes and emotions which also transitioned from childhood to adulthood. Positive and negative attitudes or emotions were reported when discussing the grandparent-grandchild relationship. In childhood these included: excitement, boredom and awkwardness, “it was always exciting going to see them” from participant 5AB. This emotion was explained by the type of contact that was made showing a link to the core category of Contact. Trips or holidays to see a grandparent elicited excitement (7 out of 10 participants), whereas a phone call or routine contact was reported as being boring or awkward (4 out of 10 participants). In discussing the relationship in adulthood, attitudes and emotions reported included being relaxed, appreciative, respectful and mature. The attitudes and emotions described in adulthood were largely positive in contrast with childhood, where they were more mixed. Participants reported to have better communication and understanding with their grandparents now that they are adults. “It’s a bit more relaxed…now that we are older they understand that we are a bit crazy” from participant 10GP.

**Conclusions**

The analytic process revealed how adult grandchildren view the transition in the grandchild-grandparent relationship from childhood to adulthood. The final stage of the analysis was to outline the underlying theory grounded in the previous analysis and data provided by the participants. The grounded theory that emerged showed that the transition was perceived as mostly positive, with a reduction in contact, but maintenance and deeper appreciation of the relationship. This was explained by changes in circumstances as well as maturation in communication. Although contact was reduced, the grandchildren, as adults, still reported making the effort to maintain the relationship with their grandparents without parental influence being the motivation for contact. In addition, the change in attitude and maturation meant that support could be reciprocated in adulthood unlike in childhood, and communication could be more meaningful, based on common interests, mutual understanding or shared knowledge.

**Discussion**

The aim of this study was to use a grounded theory approach of analysis to explore the grandparent-grandchild relationship from adult grandchildren’s perspectives focusing specifically on how the relationship transitions from childhood to adulthood. The results showed that the relationship does continue from childhood to adulthood and adult grandchildren perceived it to transition in three main ways. The type of Support needed and provided by both grandparents and their grandchildren transitioned from childhood to adulthood. In childhood, more practical support was reported such as caregiving or help with education. This was due to the needs of the grandchild at that time and to circumstances such as parental employment. Buchanan and Rotkirch (2018) and Griggs and colleagues (2010) argued that increases in longevity of family members and decreases in fertility together with the increased maternal employment create the potential for grandparents to be more involved in their grandchildren’ lives. Grandparents in the UK and in other European countries are highly involved in looking after their grandchildren (Glaser et al., 2013). As the relationship transitioned into adulthood however, support provided to grandchildren was reported as financial, a finding also supported by previous research (Hoff, 2007). Evidence of financial support was also found by Attias-Donfut, Ogg, and Wolff (2005) examining intergenerational exchanges of adults aged 50 and above in different European countries. The beneficiaries of financial transfers were found to be almost exclusively family members, and predominantly children and grandchildren.

The second factor to emerge in the transition of the relationship was the type, frequency and motivation of Contact. Contact was shown to be reduced and more telephone or internet based in adulthood compared to childhood where it was more frequent and face to face. While motivation for contact in childhood was more influenced by parents, in adulthood it was reported to be determined by the grandchild intending to provide support. Previous research showed that support and contact are important aspects of grandparent-grandchild relationships and that the relationship quality is maintained in adulthood despite a decrease in frequency of contacts (Guerts et al., 2012; Ruiz & Silverstone 2007). Moreover Bridges, Roe, Dunn and O’Connor (2007), looking at children’s perspectives of the grandparent-grandchild relationship after a parental separation, found that over time, as age increases, closeness is maintained although frequency of contacts decreases. This shows that despite changes in contact and other external circumstances, the relationship can transition into adulthood and remain strong. Guerts and colleagues (2012) found evidence of a relationship continuation from childhood to adulthood and the importance of support in shaping this relationship. In the present study not all adult grandchildren reported becoming part of their grandparents’ support network; however, the relationship needs to be strong in childhood in order to transition in this way (Guerts et al., 2012). A continuity of the grandchild-grandparent relationship is shown by Mansson and colleagues (2017) who found a positive association between the affection received from grandparents and the grandchildren’s perceptions of their grandparents and of their relationship.

The final factor to emerge in the grandparent-grandchild relationship transition was Attitude and Emotion. Participants reported a change in how they felt towards their grandparents from childhood to adulthood, with feelings of excitement being replaced with appreciation and respect. Feeling of excitement, joy and affection have been reported also by grandparents in different qualitative studies (Mansson, 2016; Clarke & Roberts, 2004) suggesting that the grandparent-grandchild relationship can be positive for both generations. The qualitative method of this study has allowed a more in depth investigation of the personal experiences of the participants and of the transition of the relationship, which is characterized not only by decreased frequency of contacts but also by positive feelings of adult grandchildren. The results of this study are in line with Kemp (2005) who argued that in adulthood grandchildren perceive the relationship with grandparents as meaningful and important.

The findings of this study could have practical implications and potential benefits for families. If a high quality relationship with grandparents is developed in childhood, this is likely to continue into adulthood and it is beneficial for grandparents and their grandchildren, as supported by previous research (Ruiz and Silverstone, 2007). Adult grandchildren’s respect and appreciation for their grandparents tend to increase as they get older. This suggests that grandparents’ involvement in adulthood is welcomed by grandchildren as they value the relationship (Kemp, 2005). When the relationship is maintained in adulthood, grandparents and grandchildren can be part of each other’s support network (Guerts et al., 2012), with both parties receiving practical as well as emotional support from the relationship, shown to be mutually beneficial. This is of particular importance due to the ageing population as grandparents are living longer (Dunifon, 2013), and they may be more likely to rely upon adult grandchildren who provide them with support (Dellman-Jenkins, Blankemeyer & Olesh 2002). Overall the practical implication of the research is the suggestion that if children are encouraged to form good relationships with their grandparents when they are young, the maintained involvement can continue to have a positive impact in adulthood. This is shown by the support provided throughout the grandchild and grandparent’s life, despite the reported decrease in contact after childhood (Ruiz & Silverstone 2007). Moreover the affection received from grandparents can also affect relationships grandchildren have with other family members (Mansson et al., 2017). Contact and a positive relationship with grandparents can also improve negative attitudes toward older adults and aging (Harwood, Hewstone , Paolini & Voci, 2005; Soliz & Harwood, 2006).

A possible limitation of this study is the sample which mainly consisted of female adults who were university students aged between 20-24years. As this was a qualitative study a smaller number of participant were recruited by opportunity sampling. As there was only one male participant the findings might not give a full account of male adult grandchildren. More over the majority were university students; this aspect may limit and restrain contact with their grandparents as they might be living far away and might be very involved with their studies and with socialising with their peers. However, the age range of young adults could also be a benefit of this study as the participants have more recently experienced the transition in the relationship. Therefore they may be in a better position to reflect on their relationships with grandparents than older adult grandchildren.

Future research on the topic could address the limitations in the sample of the current study by using a wider variety of adult grandchildren participants, including a more equal distribution of gender and a wider age range. An alternate approach to take in future research could also be to repeat the study taking into account whether participants are from two-parent biological, lone parent and stepfamilies. Attar-Schwartz, and colleagues (2009) found that grandparent involvement was more strongly associated with reduced adjustment difficulties among adolescents from lone parent or stepfamilies than those from two-parent biological families. This would show whether adult grandchildren view the relationship transition differently according to their family type. Moreover, future research could explore the relationship and the transition from childhood to adulthood in other European countries, especially in Southern European countries where grandparents’ involvement in the care of their grandchildren is more extensive (Glaser et al., 2013). In conclusion this study has provided an in depth exploration of adult grandchildren’s perspectives of the grandparent-grandchild relationship and has shown that, if a high quality relationship is maintained from childhood to adulthood, this has important implications for both generations.

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Table 1

*Type and frequency of contacts between adult grandchildren and grandparents in adulthood and childhood.*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Main type of contact |  | Frequency of contacts |
|  | Face to face | Phone | Internet |  | Daily | Weekly | Once/twice a month | Every two months |
| Adulthood | *2* | 6 | *2* |  | 2 | *0* | *2* | *6* |
| Childhood | *9* | *1* | *0* |  | *4* | *1* | *2* | *3* |