The Effect of Transition to Grandparenthood on Psychological Well-being

1. Introduction

As a result of socio-demographic changes in the aging population, grandparenthood has now become an important part of a normal aging process. With the growing longevity, more and more people are living longer enough to see their children grow up to become parents themselves and have children of their own. Accordingly, there have been active discourses on the role of grandparenthood and grandparenting in successful aging. Furthermore, the middle-to-old aged population is expected to not only play the role of grandparents for decades, but also actively take part in other domains of life such as leisure, volunteering, and religious activities, not to mention many of them still engaging in the labor force. Therefore, the aging population is more likely to assume multiple roles at the same time, giving rise to the need for researches on the effects of transition events on their psychological well-being. Since grandparenthood is considered as one of the most common and significant life transitions, it became an integral part of the public discussion over the lives of aging population.

Although there have been a number of studies on grandparenthood as a transition event as well as one of the indicators for entrance into an elderly stage in the western world, it is relatively recent that grandparenthood has received research attention in Korea. This is partially due to the widespread concern that Korea is headed towards an aging society faster than any other country in the world. However, most of the latest researches on grandparenthood tend to focus on the role of grandparents as caregivers for their grandchildren, especially the role of grandmother as the major caregiver and the grandparents-headed households where grandparents have to take full responsibility for raising their grandchildren on behalf of their parents. However, research findings show mixed results as some studies suggest that grandparenting negatively affects the health and psychological well-being of grandparents\(^1\), while others show that caregiving provides positive experience and satisfaction\(^2\) or has


indirect effects through mediators such as resources or parenting stress. Moreover, all of these studies used cross-sectional data, so they failed to make causal inferences from the experience of transitional events to the individual health and well-being. It seems fair to say that, in Korea, there is a complete absence of a longitudinal study examining the independent effect of transition to grandparenthood on individual outcomes for middle-to-old aged population. As more and more penal data are becoming available, it is high time that we study grandparenthood as an important life course stage in the context of Korean society where aging emerged as one of the key issues of concern.

This study examines the effect of experiencing the first transition to grandparenthood on depression among middle-to-old aged population using longitudinal data drawn from the Korean Longitudinal Study of Aging (KLoSa) in Korea.

2. Theoretical Background

The life course perspective suggests that individuals going through role transitions encounter a new set of expectations and their social identity takes on a different facet. Whereas many adult transitions are self-initiated, becoming a grandparent is not. It is what has been labeled a countertransition, a life change brought about by someone else’s transition. It is said that the only voluntary aspect of becoming a grandparent is the decision to parent the grandchild. Therefore, the experience of becoming a grandparent is expected to be totally different in its nature from transition to parenthood which had been the main topic of interest in terms of life course transitions. However, empirical studies on the effects of transition to grandparenthood on individual health or psychological outcomes including depression or satisfaction have focused mostly on the role or identity of grandparents, their

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relationship with the grandchild, and subjective meanings grandparents attach to grandparenting and grandparenthood, producing inconsistent results. There seems to be little research that examined the genuine effect of grandparenthood transition on physical or psychological aspects of grandparents. Although most of the data used in previous studies are cross-sectional, there is one longitudinal study by Somary and Sticker (1998) which followed grandparents for two years, comparing their expectations and experiences of grandparenthood before and after their first grandchild was born.

Finding that the satisfaction score was higher for grandparents after experiencing grandparenthood has served as an empirical evidence to support the main hypothesis of this study that those who became grandparents for the first time in their lives will have lower level of depression compared to those who are yet to experience transition to grandparenthood.

3. Data and Research Methods

The data for this study came from the first and second waves of the Korean Longitudinal Study of Aging (KLoSa), which includes in-depth information from personal interviews conducted in 2006 (Time 1) and 2008 (Time 2) with a nationally representative sample of 10,254 middle-to-old aged Koreans over 45 years old. The analytic sample for this study will consist of respondents who became grandparents for the first time between Time 1 and Time 2.

Depression is measured using a 10-item modified version of the Center for Epidemiological Studies- Depression (CES-D) index. The primary dependent variable is transition to grandparenthood, so in order to control for the confounding effects of other predictors of depression, subjective assessment of the current health condition will be selected as one of the control variables in addition to demographic characteristics of gender, age, education, marital status, household income, and

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employment status based on the findings from previous research\textsuperscript{8}.

To analyze the genuine effect of grandparenthood transition on the level of depression, lagged dependent variable (LDV) model\textsuperscript{9} will be used to control for the initial level of depression in Time 1, so the depression score from Time 1 will be included in the model as a control variable. This model will be estimated by ordinary least squares (OLS) regression using STATA.

4. Expected Findings

The analysis finding is expected to support the hypothesis that “those who became grandparents for the first time in their lives will have lower level of depression compared to those who are yet to experience transition to grandparenthood”, showing an independent effect of the transition event of becoming a grandparent on the depression level of middle-to-old aged Koreans.
