

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

First-time parents' personal growth: Role of parental separation anxiety

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Abstract

The transition to parenthood is both a joyful and a stress-evoking event and thus may lead to the experience of personal growth. Parental separation anxiety is a potential source for stress, not yet examined in this context. The study aimed to examine new parents' personal growth, exploring the contribution of parental separation anxiety, and to investigate the contribution of the personal resources of self-mastery and emotional intelligence. In a cross-sectional study, Israeli parents ($n = 315$) whose first child was up to 24 months old completed self-report questionnaires. Results show that higher personal growth was associated with greater separation anxiety among both parents, but more strongly among fathers. Higher personal growth was also associated with higher self-mastery for mothers, and lower emotional intelligence for both parents. The results indicate that parental separation anxiety is related to the personal growth of new parents, and highlight the importance of understanding the transition to parenthood as a differential experience for mothers and fathers. It is recommended that research among fathers be expanded, and that professionals discuss potential separation issues with new parents, and encourage their recognition of inner strengths to enhance their potential to experience personal growth in this demanding period in their lives.

KEYWORDS

emotional intelligence, parents, personal growth, self-mastery, separation anxiety

1 | INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been growing recognition that the need to cope with the inevitable stress of the transition to parenthood may lead to the experience of personal growth, reflected in the discovery of new strengths, setting of a renewed path in life and a newfound appreciation of interpersonal relationships (Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2019). Considerable evidence has been presented over the last two decades regarding the role of personal resources in the

personal growth (originally termed posttraumatic growth; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) of both women and men in the transition to parenthood (Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2019) and the contextual aspects which may be related to it, especially levels of objective or perceived stress. The present study was aimed at furthering this line of inquiry by examining the role played by parental separation anxiety as a potential stressor and the personal resources of self-mastery and emotional intelligence in the personal growth of new mothers and fathers in the first two years following childbirth.

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request – Taubman

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1.1 | Personal growth and perceived stress

Previous studies on personal growth following the birth of the first child have related to the level of perceived stress during the mother's childbirth experience (e.g., Sawyer et al., 2015), or compared an ordinary transition to parenthood with a more "objectively" stressful transition, such as conceiving with the help of fertility treatment, giving birth prematurely or the birth of twins (Spielman & Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2009; Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2010, 2018). Such studies revealed, for example, that the main predictor of the growth of new mothers was posttraumatic stress symptoms reported during pregnancy in response to a recent stressful event (Sawyer et al., 2012), and that giving birth to premature baby/ies (either singletons or twins) was systematically associated with greater personal growth (Noy et al., 2015; Porat-Zyman et al., 2017; Taubman – Ben-Ari & Spielman, 2014). Thus, for more vulnerable women, or those in a more stressful situation, the experience was more likely to be perceived as a crisis, leading to a higher sense of personal growth (Sawyer et al., 2012).

1.2 | Parental separation anxiety

More subjective stresses that might contribute to new parents' personal growth, such as negative perceptions of childbirth (Sawyer & Ayers, 2009), and the challenges embedded in the transition to parenthood (Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2019), have also been investigated. However, no previous study has looked into the potential effect of parental separation anxiety, defined as parental concern linked to short-term separation from one's child (Hock et al., 1983; McBride & Hock, 1984). As individuals transition to parenthood and form an attachment with the infant, they are likely to experience emotional difficulty in the face of any separation from the child (Cooklin et al., 2014), even leaving them with a professional caregiver for a few hours or placing them in daycare.

Studies comparing paternal and maternal separation anxiety have produced equivocal results. Some have found that mothers experience a greater degree of separation anxiety at 3 months (Scher & Sharabany, 2005) and 6 months of child's age (Wille, 1998), while at 18 months the difference between mothers and fathers is minimal (Wille, 1998). Others report a similar level of separation anxiety for both parents at various ages from birth to 5 years old (Deater-Deckard et al., 1994; Hock & Lutz, 1998; Peleg et al., 2015).

Although the level of separation anxiety may be similar for both genders, research suggests that the origin is not the same (Deater-Deckard et al., 1994; Hock & Lutz, 1998; Scher & Sharabany, 2005; Wille, 1998). Thus, using the Maternal Separation Anxiety Scale (MSAS; McBride & Hock, 1984), Wille (1998) found that mothers perceived the effects of separation on the infant more positively than fathers, who showed more concern, most likely due to lesser involvement. When the gender of the parent and the child were examined (Scher & Sharabany, 2005), the results showed that mothers of sons reported greater stress than mothers of daughters. This

What is known about this topic

- The need to cope with the inevitable stress of the transition to parenthood may lead to the experience of personal growth.
- The way in which parents cope in stressful circumstances is determined by their personal resources.
- There is evidence regarding associations between groups considered as objectively experiencing more stress (parents of preterm babies, twins, etc.), and levels of perceived general or parenting stress, on the one hand, and personal growth, on the other.

What this paper adds

- Contributors to personal growth are different for mothers and fathers.
- Parental separation anxiety is a source of stress which is related to personal growth, but is more strongly so for fathers than for mothers.
- Lower emotional intelligence is related to greater personal growth for both men and women, whereas higher self-mastery is associated with more personal growth only among women.

suggests that the sex of the child may be related to the degree of maternal stress, which has been found to correlate with separation anxiety. No difference in the stress associated with the sex of the child was found among fathers (Scher & Sharabany, 2005). In addition, when parent's age was entered into the analysis, no significant association emerged between maternal age and separation anxiety, whereas age correlated negatively with separation anxiety among fathers (Scher & Sharabany, 2005).

1.3 | Personal resources

As noted above, researchers have also looked at a number of personal resources that may affect the way individuals cope with the stress aroused by the transition to parenthood and enable them to experience growth. Studies show, for example, that greater optimism following childbirth among new fathers (Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2018), greater resilience during pregnancy among women (Nishi & Usuda, 2017), and higher self-esteem among mothers after childbirth (Spielman & Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2009) are associated with higher personal growth postpartum. In contrast to these seemingly positive resources, studies examining attachment orientation, presently considered an indication of the ability, or inability, to regulate emotions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019), have shown that anxious attachment contributed to personal growth among fathers of full- and pre-term infants shortly after the birth of a first child (Spielman & Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2009),

and that both anxious and avoidant attachment were related to the personal growth of fathers, but not mothers, two years later (Taubman - Ben-Ari & Spielman, 2014). Furthermore, although a study of first-time mothers during pregnancy and following childbirth did not indicate a significant association between anxious attachment and personal growth (Taubman - Ben-Ari et al., 2009), among mothers of preterms, lower attachment anxiety was related to higher personal growth on two dimensions: spirituality and personal strength (Rozen et al., 2018).

During the stressful transition to parenthood, anxiously attached individuals may feel more threatened (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019). This tendency, along with the presence of a baby who is totally dependent on them, may cause them to feel overwhelmed and to experience a variety of negative emotions, which, in turn, may lead to efforts to obtain comfort and support from their attachment figures. Their ultimate 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 family (Cadell et al., 2003), which may be interpreted as growth (Taubman - Ben-Ari, 2012). However, if parents react with despair instead of finding a way to cope, the opportunity to experience growth will not be available to them.

These initial findings suggest that in order to experience growth, a certain combination of personal resources is required (Taubman - Ben-Ari, 2019). On the one hand, parents need a positive life orientation, such as optimism and resilience. On the other hand, some degree of vulnerability, as reflected in anxious and avoidant attachment orientations, is also necessary in order to be able to go through the hardship, change, and emerge a somewhat different person (Taubman - Ben-Ari, 2019).

With this in mind, two additional resources that might be relevant to the personal growth of new parents were examined in the current study. The first is *self-mastery*, defined as a general sense of confidence in the ability to influence or control the forces affecting one's life (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978), and is therefore a personal resource that makes it possible to foresee and control events (Diehl & Hay, 2010). Women in fertility treatment who enjoyed a higher level of dispositional self-mastery, for example, reported less stress and more mental well-being (Gourounti et al., 2012). However, a study of the association between self-mastery and personal growth among new mothers shortly after childbirth did not find a significant correlation between the two variables (Taubman - Ben-Ari et al., 2009). This resource would therefore appear to warrant further investigation.

The second personal resource examined here is *emotional intelligence*, which refers to the ability to perceive and identify emotions both in oneself and in others, the ability to regulate one's state of mind in a proper manner and the ability to improve reasoning. As such, it is a reflection of the cognitive processes that accompany an ongoing emotional experience (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Empirical evidence indicates that more emotionally intelligent people are likely to experience higher psychological well-being than those with lower emotional intelligence (Augusto-Landa

et al., 2011; Brackett & Mayer, 2003), as well as higher personal growth following negative life events (Thomas et al., 2020). This resource therefore has the potential to regulate the stress of new parents, and consequently may be connected to personal growth in the transition to parenthood.

Several *background variables* were also included in the current analysis, as previous results are inconsistent. While some studies show that younger age (Sawyer & Ayers, 2009; Taubman - Ben-Ari et al., 2011) and lower level of education (Taubman - Ben-Ari et al., 2010) are associated with higher personal growth among women, others report no such associations (Taubman - Ben-Ari & Spielman, 2014). Similarly, both higher (Chasson & Taubman - Ben-Ari, 2021; Noy et al., 2015) and lower economic status (Rozen et al., 2018; Taubman - Ben-Ari et al., 2018) have been associated with parents' personal growth.

1.4 | The current study

As no consistent findings could be found in the literature regarding the variables examined in this study, specific hypotheses could not be phrased. Instead, three research questions were formulated:

1. Are separation anxiety, self-mastery and emotional intelligence associated with the personal growth of new parents?
2. What are the unique and combined contributions of the independent variables to parents' personal growth up to 2 years following the birth of their first child?
3. Does parent's gender serve as a moderating variable between the independent and dependent variables?

2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 | Participants and procedure

Following approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (no. 011701), a convenience sample of 315 Jewish Israeli parents was recruited. The participants consisted of 234 mothers aged 20–45 ($M = 30.39$, $SD = 4.96$) and 81 fathers aged 21–45 ($M = 31.69$, $SD = 5.12$). Parents were considered eligible for the study if they had a child who was up to 24 months old ($M = 7.54$ months, $SD = 6.4$), and indicated that they could complete questionnaires in Hebrew. The aim of the study was explained to them, and they were assured confidentiality and anonymity. After giving their signed informed consent, they were handed the questionnaire in a sealed envelope, along with a stamped self-addressed envelope in which to return it. Most of the participants were married (94.2%); 76.5% had an academic degree, and the rest had a high school or post-high school diploma; 55.6% defined their income as average, 28.3% as above average, and 16% as below average; 72% defined their health status as very good, 24.7% as good, and the rest as poor. In regard to the children, 57% were boys, and 43% were girls.

2.2 | Instruments

The Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), translated into Hebrew and previously validated for mothers (Taubman - Ben-Ari et al., 2011), was used to measure personal growth. The inventory consists of 21 items that relate to changes on the personal, interpersonal and philosophical levels (e.g. "I found I am stronger than I previously believed"). Participants rated the degree to which the various changes had occurred since the birth of their first child on a scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Cronbach's alpha in the present study was 0.96. A growth score was calculated for each participant as the mean of their responses to all items, with higher scores indicating greater personal growth. A preliminary multiple group analysis was performed to ensure that the PTGI factor loadings were similar across men and women. Specifically, we tested the invariance across genders in their growth inventory outcome. We looked at the reduction in the comparative fit index (CFI) as a result for equality constraints, where weak invariance means factor loadings were set equal, and strong invariance means that loadings and intercepts were set equal. Although men differed from women in their item levels (Strong invariance: $\Delta\text{CFI} = 0.013$), a weaker invariance test did not detect differences (Weak invariance: $\Delta\text{CFI} = 0.005$). This complemented the construct validation and justified our constructed indicator for the personal growth score.

Maternal Separation Anxiety Scale (Hock et al., 1983), translated into Hebrew by Maysel and Scher (2000) and adapted for both parents, was used to assess parental separation anxiety. The original instrument consists of 35 items on three independent subscales. Following the suggestion of Hock et al. (1989), the present study used only the Separation Anxiety subscale, which contains 21 items relating to the levels of anxiety, sadness and guilt experienced by the parent when separated from the infant (e.g., 'I don't enjoy myself when I am away from my child'). Responses were indicated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). As Cronbach's Alpha for the 21 items was high in the current sample (0.92), scores were calculated for each participant by averaging their responses to all items, with higher scores indicating higher parental separation anxiety.

The Self-Mastery Scale (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978), a 7-item instrument assessing the participant's sense of control over their life (e.g., 'I have little control over the things that happen to me'). Responses were marked on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). The Hebrew version of the instrument was previously employed in a sample of new mothers (Taubman - Ben-Ari et al., 2009). As an internal reliability of $\alpha = 0.79$ was found in the current study, a self-mastery score was calculated for each participant by averaging their responses to all items, with higher scores indicating a greater sense of self-mastery.

The Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS; Schutte et al., 1998). The 33-item questionnaire is composed of 11 items relating to each of the three domains of the original Salovey and Mayer (1990) model of EI: emotional appraisal; emotion regulation and utilisation of emotions

(e.g., 'I am aware of my non-verbal messages'; 'I can identify other people's feelings by observing their facial expressions'; 'I can easily identify my own feelings while I am feeling them'). Participants were asked to indicate the degree to which the statement in each item applied to them, marking their responses on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The validity of the scale has been supported by its correlation with theoretically related constructs, including mood awareness, clarity of feelings, mood repair, optimism and impulse control, interpersonal functioning, and cognitive task persistence (Schutte et al., 1998, 2001). In the current sample, Cronbach's alpha was 0.97. Each participant was assigned an EI score equal to the mean of their responses to all items, with higher scores indicating greater emotional intelligence.

A Sociodemographic Inventory was used to obtain background data relating to the parent: sex, age, education, family status, perceived economic status (well below average/ below average/average/above average/well above average), and perceived physical health (very poor/poor/fair/good/very good). Data were also collected regarding the child's age and sex.

2.3 | Data analysis

As mentioned above, a preliminary analysis included confirmatory factor analysis for construct validation followed by a multiple group comparison to ensure men and women shared similar construct perceptions. Next, empirical analyses were performed in three stages. First, *F*-tests with the Welch's adjustment for heterogeneity were conducted to examine gender differences in the study variables. Then, Pearson correlations were calculated between the independent variables and personal growth. Finally, a hierarchical regression was conducted to examine the unique and combined contribution of the independent variables to the explained variance in parents' personal growth up to 2 years after childbirth. Based on the literature, the variables were entered in a forced order: sociodemographic variables (parent's gender, age, education, physical health, economic status) in Step 1; infant's characteristics (gender, age) in Step 2; the personal resources of self-mastery and emotional intelligence in Step 3; separation anxiety in Step 4; and the interactions between gender and the independent variables in Step 5.

3 | RESULTS

The *F*-tests, means and *SD*'s for all study variables, along with the Pearson correlations between them and personal growth, are presented in Table 1. The *F*-tests indicated that men reported higher self-mastery [$F(1,312) = 48.17, p < 0.001$; adjusted: $F(1,138.2) = 48.72, p < 0.001$], emotional intelligence [$F(1,313) = 36.97, p < 0.001$; adjusted: $F(1,276.2) = 67.91, p < 0.001$], and to some extent, personal growth [$F(1,312) = 3.97, p = 0.047$; adjusted: $F(1,115.8) = 3.14, p = 0.079$], than women, where 'adjusted' stands for Welch's adjustment for possible heterogeneity. In addition, personal growth

TABLE 1 Means, SDs and *F*-test between study variables and parent's personal growth in the whole sample and by gender, and Pearson correlations between study variables

	Mothers (<i>n</i> = 234)		Fathers (<i>n</i> = 81)		<i>F</i> (1, 312)	η_p^2	Welch	Whole sample (<i>n</i> = 315)		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>r</i>
Self-mastery	2.62	0.54	3.11	0.54	48.17***	0.134	48.72***	2.74	0.58	0.21***
Emotional intelligence	3.07	0.92	3.71	0.45	36.97***	0.106	67.91***	3.23	0.87	-0.24***
Parental separation anxiety	3.23	0.57	3.19	0.76	0.33	0.001	0.25	3.22	0.63	0.27***
Personal growth	3.19	1.10	3.50	1.41	3.97*	0.013	3.14~	3.27	1.19	-

Note: Welch stands for Welch's adjusted *F* for heterogeneity across groups.

p* < 0.05; **p* < 0.001; ~*p* < 0.10.

TABLE 2 Results of hierarchical regression analysis of parent's personal growth (*n* = 315)

	β	<i>t</i>	ΔR^2	<i>F</i>
Step 1			0.062**	
Gender ^a	-0.07	1.17		
Age	0.11	1.80		
Education	-0.06	0.86		
Physical health	-0.06	0.99		
Economic status	0.15	2.41*		
Step 2			0.049***	
Child's gender ^b	0.06	0.99		
Child's age	-0.22	3.67***		
Step 3			0.037**	
Self-mastery	0.06	0.72		
Emotional intelligence	-0.20	2.54**		
Step 4			0.109***	
Parental separation anxiety	0.34	6.07***		
Step 5			0.047***	
Gender × Self-mastery	0.43	2.97**		
Gender × Emotional intelligence	-0.45	1.92		
Gender × Parental separation anxiety	-0.18	2.02*		
<i>R</i> ²			0.303***	8.30***

^aGender: 0 men, 1 women.

^bChild's gender: 0 boy, 1 girl.

p* < 0.05; *p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001.

correlated positively with separation anxiety and self-mastery, and negatively with emotional intelligence. Thus, higher personal growth was associated with higher parental separation anxiety and self-mastery, and lower emotional intelligence.

The results of the hierarchical regression, conducted to explore the unique and combined contribution of the variables to parents' personal growth, appear in Table 2. The independent variables explained 30.3% of the variance in personal growth. Parents' background variables in Step 1 contributed 6.2% to the explanation of the variance,

with only better economic status making a significant contribution to higher personal growth. In Step 2, child's characteristics contributed a further 4.9% to growth, with younger infant age associated with more personal growth. Step 3 added 3.7% to the explained variance, showing that lower emotional intelligence was significantly associated with greater growth. In Step 4, separation anxiety contributed a significant 10.9% to the variance in growth, with higher anxiety related to more personal growth. Finally, the interactions between parent's gender and both self-mastery and separation anxiety were significantly associated with growth, together contributing an additional 4.7% to the explanation of the variance.

The PROCESS procedure (Hayes, 2013), used to analyse the sources of the interactions (Figure 1a,b), revealed that whereas higher self-mastery was related to higher growth for mothers ($b = 0.49$, $p = 0.02$), the two variables were unrelated for fathers ($b = -0.43$, $p = 0.10$). Furthermore, higher separation anxiety was related to greater growth for both parents, but fathers showed a steeper (i.e., stronger) association than mothers ($b = 0.97$, $p < 0.001$; $b = 0.42$, $p = 0.014$, respectively).

4 | DISCUSSION

This study investigated the contribution of a potential source of stress which has not yet been considered as a contributor to personal growth—parental separation anxiety. It also investigated the contribution of two personal resources—self-mastery and emotional intelligence—to mothers' and fathers' personal growth in the 2 years following the birth of their first child. The most salient finding is the moderating effect of gender. That is, the results show that both perceived stress and personal resources contribute differentially to personal growth among mothers and fathers. Thus, although in the sample as a whole, higher separation anxiety and lower emotional intelligence were associated with personal growth, and self-mastery made no significant contribution at all, the interactions indicate that these associations are moderated by the parent's gender. Lower emotional intelligence was indeed related to personal growth for both men and women, as reflected by the non-significant interaction. However, whereas higher self-mastery was associated with more personal growth among women, this association was not

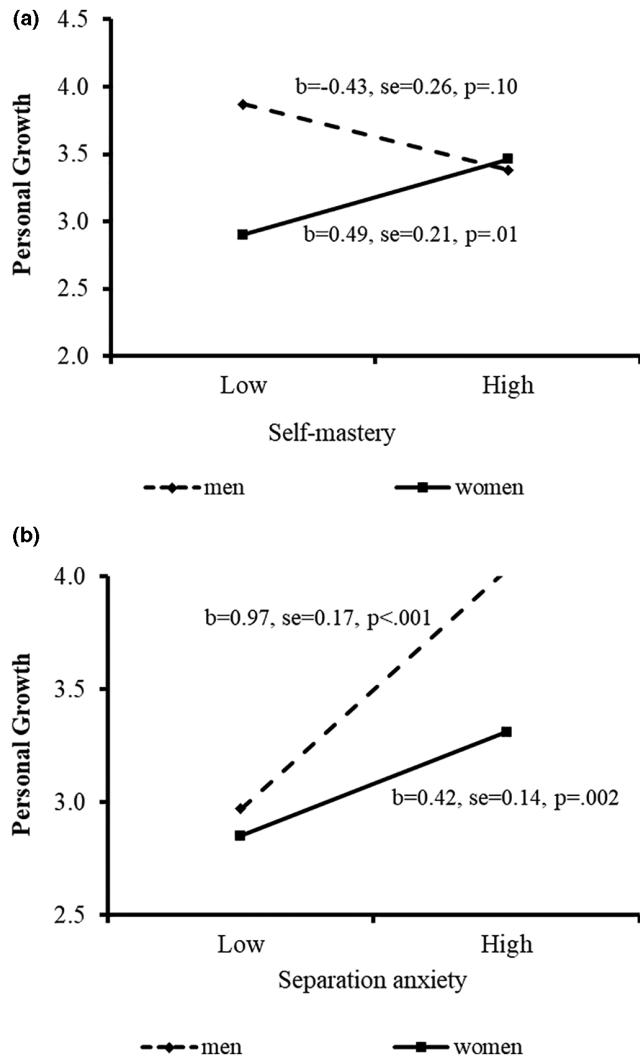


FIGURE 1 (a) Interaction between gender and self-mastery as predictors of personal growth. (b) Interaction between gender and separation anxiety as predictors of personal growth

significant among men. In addition, separation anxiety was found to be more strongly related to personal growth for fathers than for mothers. As previous studies of personal growth in the transition to parenthood were conducted predominately among mothers, little is known about differences between the parents. This study is therefore among the first to show that the sense of growth of new mothers and fathers may be associated with different factors.

A hint of this difference was provided by Spielman and Taubman – Ben-Ari's (2009) study of parents of pre- and full-term babies, in which mothers, but not fathers, yielded a significant positive correlation between self-esteem and growth, and fathers, but not mothers, showed a significant association between anxious attachment and growth. The results of the current study indicate that whereas fathers are more inclined to experience personal growth when they are more anxious about separating from their infant, women's sense of personal growth is less strongly related to this type of fear. It is possible that maternal growth is affected more by other anxieties not assessed in this study. Moreover, although a similar level of

separation anxiety was found here for men and women, consistent with the results of earlier studies (Deater-Deckard et al., 1994; Peleg et al., 2015), it has been suggested that the sources of this anxiety may differ between the genders (Deater-Deckard et al., 1994; Hock & Lutz, 1998; Scher & Sharabany, 2005; Wille, 1998), and it may therefore be related to different psychological outcomes as well.

The strong positive association between separation anxiety and personal growth among men may also mirror the contention that a high level of stress is a prerequisite for growth because it is more likely to challenge fundamental assumptions (Park, 1998; Stanton et al., 2006). The fact that it was less related to growth among women may suggest that women learn more quickly to adjust to this type of fear, or are more prepared for it, and thus it is not life changing for them. It might also indicate that women experience a broader array of additional anxieties, so that they are less affected specifically by separation anxiety. These potential explanations require more thorough examination in future studies exploring the role of a wide range of stressors in the personal growth of new parents.

Sense of self-mastery was also found here to be higher among men, but only for women was it positively related to personal growth. Previous studies report a positive association between self-esteem and personal growth among mothers (Spielman & Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2009). It would appear, therefore, that mothers with stronger confidence in their abilities experience greater personal growth during the transition to parenthood.

In contrast, although emotional intelligence was higher among men, a lower level of emotional intelligence was associated with a greater experience of growth among mothers and fathers alike. Although this finding seems to contradict that of a previous study (Thomas et al., 2020), it should be noticed that the latter was not conducted in the context of parenthood. A better understanding of the current finding might be related to the results of earlier studies showing that more anxious and avoidant attachment is connected to higher growth (e.g., Taubman – Ben-Ari & Spielman, 2014). Both insecure attachment and lower emotional intelligence are indications of difficulties in regulating emotions. Our finding is therefore in line with the suggestion that some degree of vulnerability is needed to experience personal growth, particularly in the demanding years of early parenthood (Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2019).

The higher growth among men revealed in the t-test should be taken with caution as it was not replicated in the regression, where other variables were entered as well. It also contradicts existing evidence that women tend to report higher personal growth than men (Taubman – Ben-Ari & Spielman, 2014). Indeed, it is reasonable to assume that mothers will experience more growth than fathers as they typically undergo more extensive and significant change, including the physiological effects of pregnancy and birth and the psychological difficulty of coping with the need to give up their former selves and independence (Nicolson, 1999).

In respect to the demographic variables, only better economic status yielded a positive association with growth. This is consistent with previous studies reporting an association between higher growth and mothers' better economic status (Chasson & Taubman

– Ben-Ari, 2021; Noy et al., 2015). The lack of a significant contribution by the other demographic variables is in line with previous studies in which age, level of education (Taubman – Ben-Ari & Spielman, 2014) and physical health (e.g., Noy et al., 2015) did not predict personal growth. Interestingly, infant's age was inversely related to personal growth. This could be a result of the higher awareness to possible changes at the beginning of parenthood, as a mirror of the ever-changing reality at this stage. This explanation, however, deserves further examination in future studies.


Among the limitations of the current study, it should be noted that it relies solely on participants' perceptions. However, previous studies have shown that self-reports of growth tend to be corroborated by significant others (e.g., Taubman – Ben-Ari et al., 2011). In addition, the study used a convenience sample and related only to Israeli parents, with more mothers than fathers in the sample. Future investigations might attempt to replicate the results in other populations and employ a more representative sample. Nevertheless, the fact that the voice of fathers was heard here along with that of mothers is a strength of the study, and should be encouraged in future studies as well. In addition, no specific information was collected concerning the health and temperament of the child. Future studies would therefore do well to collect more in-depth data on these characteristics. Finally, this was a cross-sectional study conducted at a single point in time, future studies should examine trajectory of growth over time to gain a fuller picture of the process.

Notwithstanding the limitations, the study contributes to existing literature by examining the potential role of a specific stressor and two personal resources, none of which has previously been considered in respect to personal growth following the transition to parenthood. Moreover, it explored the effect of these factors among both mothers and fathers. The results indicate that separation anxiety plays a significant role in fathers' potential to experience personal growth in the wake of the birth of their first child. In addition, they provide further support for the idea that growth requires some degree of vulnerability. The transition to parenthood is not only a private life event, but also a public health challenge. The current findings may therefore aid professionals in gaining a better understanding of the needs of new mothers and fathers, enabling them to offer more sensitive tools to assist both men and women in the challenging period of early parenthood. Moreover, most interventions to assist new parents operate around individual-level activities. Public practitioners working with families and especially with new parents should consider developing programmes on a community level to raise awareness to this vulnerable period in life, and to potentially vulnerable individuals who are going through it with heightened anxieties and distress.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

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