

“I am not that type of grandmother”: (non)compliance with the grandmother archetype among contemporary Czech grandmothers

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Introduction

In many cultures, historical archetypes continue to influence modern understandings of the grandmother role. The lived experience, social structures, institutional framing and cultural images of grandmotherhood are highly relevant for social scientific examination and for understanding the changing and diverse phenomenon of grandparenting. These aspects dynamically overlap, and the overlaps or contrasts they produce have considerable impact on how people perceive themselves and how they co-construct their identity and self-understanding as a grandparent.

We go about our daily lives with omnipresent archetypes. We are in close contact with them from our early childhood; we learn about them from legends and myths, from fairy tales as well as from daily talk. Archetypes live in the stories we tell and form a vivid part of our cultures. As Snowden (2001, p 1) recounts:

As people tell and retell stories about their environment, their beliefs and values as expressed through the characters within those stories gradually become more and more extreme, until each character individually represents one aspect of that culture, and collectively the characters and the stories that reveal those characters provide a profound set of cultural indicators.

The nature of archetypes also points to their relative durability in time – they transmit values, social norms and cultural codes within

and between generations via written and narrated accounts. In many cultures, the historical archetype of the grandmother continues to influence modern understandings of the grandparent role (Meier, 2017; Troyansky, 2016).

In this chapter, we introduce the Grandmother, a true archetype: heroine and saint; symbol of cherishing love, kindness and tenderness, and of national pride. A person, an inspiration, a legend, a cultural legacy; this is the Grandmother¹ portrayed in the Czech book written in 1855 by the female author Božena Němcová. There are few books from that era that would still be on obligatory school reading lists today, and even fewer fictional characters of that time would be visible in our modern culture. But the Grandmother figure seems to reappear persistently, reintroduced by socialisation processes, educational systems, cultural artefacts, public media channels and, last but not least, by various accounts of lay actors in the Czech Republic. We cannot claim she is also a part of everyday conversations, for which we do not have data, but we are able to follow her presence in the research context in interviews conducted on the later life roles of ‘young-old’ women and men in conjunction with our multimethod project, ‘Role overload: Grandparenting in the era of active ageing’, which will be outlined shortly.

In this chapter we argue that the Grandmother, as portrayed in the aforementioned book, has become so deeply embedded in Czech culture that it has transformed from being a fictional character into an **archetype** in the sociological meaning of the word: a typified picture and frame of reference employed when talking about how the social role of a grandmother should be performed. We argue that when the young-old in the Czech context talk about their grandparenting experience and claim “I am not *that type* of grandmother”, they not only assume a general understanding of what ‘that type’ represents but also relate ‘that type’ and its characteristics to Božena Němcová’s Grandmother, as a personification of the ideal type, with the intention of framing and (re)positioning (their own) grandparental role performance – either as adhering/compliant or as nonstandard grandmothering.

Our analysis has two goals. The first is to show how cultural artefacts can shape narratives about grandmotherhood and how they may be used to position one’s own social role. Second, we aim to add new knowledge on typologies of grandparenthood, because the ‘ideal type’ (or ‘that type’) – as the representative of a tacit, cultural archetype – remains poorly understood. By ‘ideal’, we mean not only a purely theoretical concept but also the norm: the best-fitting or best-performing role holder. Especially in the latter meanings, the ‘ideal’

reflects dynamic action categories such as caring versus entertaining, active versus passive; that is, dualities of grandparenthood typologies imbued with putative action and role-performance contents and strategies (Bengtson, 1985).

This chapter is structured as follows. First, we provide a description of *The Grandmother: A story of country life in Bohemia* (hereafter *The Grandmother*), its author and relevant contextual information. We then move to eclectic accounts of the reappearances of the Grandmother figure in present-day culture and public arenas to show how the figure is gaining momentum and is made available, or even offered, to today's grandmothers as a relational role model. Following an outline of our empirical data collection process, we move on to illustrate how this ideal type is being 'picked up' by young-old grandparents in the Czech Republic. We will elaborate the process of translation of this cultural epitome of grandmotherhood into self-accentuation, showing how it is reflected in the construction of narrative images of grandmotherhood, from the point of view of not only a grandmother but also an adult grandchild and parent (that is to say, with reference to the earlier parts of the research participants' life course).

With the help of our interview data, we illustrate the ideal type as defined not only by the (more widely discussed) emotional features (kindness, closeness, tenderness, availability, affection) but also by the possession and employment of specific knowledge, which we label as **ruling over materiality**. We find these features especially in references to food preparation and baking. In the conclusion, we discuss how the 'typical' grandmother concept can help enhance existing typologies (or taxonomies) of grandparental roles (cf. Arber and Timonen 2012; Keeling, 2012) and how the normativity of the ideal is being deployed in accounts of today's older persons (cf. Hasmanová Marhánková, 2015).

The Grandmother phenomenon: the author, the book and the story

We draw on both the Czech language original version (1979 edition) and a modernised English translation (2011) of *The Grandmother* for the analysis of the text and quotes used in this chapter. We have consulted diverse secondary literature on the story and the author, such as book reviews and academic texts. What we have found particularly stimulating for our analysis here are readers' online book reviews (their quotes here are attributed to their online usernames) on three platforms: DatabazeKnig.cz (*The Book* database, Czech only,

www.databazeknih.cz), Goodreads (www.goodreads.com) and Amazon.com (www.amazon.com). The last two cover a relatively long period of time and are geographically dispersed, featuring input from not only Czechs in English but also foreign readers and expatriates. We also performed a full-text search in the Czech language of online search engines, looking specifically for mentions of The Grandmother in news pieces. Further, thanks to our sensitisation to the topic, we could easily spot several instances of the Grandmother presence in the physical environment and public spaces, and will briefly describe these as well.

Božena Němcová (1820–62), the author, was born in Vienna to a German-speaking father and a Czech mother. Her father was an officer in the royal household of Katharina, Princess of Sagan, wife of Count Schulenberg. Later on, Němcová's mother was also employed by the princess and a great deal of the household management was transferred to Magdalena Novotná, the author's maternal grandmother (cf. Chan and Elder, 2000, on matrilineal grandparenting). The family followed the employer to various destinations within the Empire, so Božena was very mobile and had access to education. The stories about her life never neglect to mention not only her beauty and popularity among men but also the tragic story of her deceased son and unhappy marriage with Josef Němec (in 1837, when she was 17 years old), 'an ardent Czech nationalist but way below his wife's intellectual standard' (Eben, 2011, p 333).

The Grandmother, written by Němcová in 1855, is a story of a grandmother who is invited by one of her three children to join her household after their seasonal move to a nearby village. After initial hesitation, the Grandmother moves in and meets with her daughter, three grandchildren, two dogs, son-in-law and many local characters in the neighbourhood. What follows are 'snapshots' of various events from the life of the family and wider community – including the Princess, for whom the Grandmother's son-in-law worked. The Grandmother is the pivotal character of the book, and its contents relay either events occurring to her (or in her presence) or stories told by or for her.

As the background of the story very closely resembles the childhood experiences of the author, it is believed that the book is autobiographical and that Němcová – present in her story as the main child character, Barunka – is drawing on memories of her own grandmother, Magdalena. Besides the biographical similarities, the introductory lines support this notion and are written from a perspective of deep grief:

It was long, long ago, when last I gazed on that dear face, kissed those pale, wrinkled cheeks, and tried to fathom the depths of those blue eyes, in which were hidden so much goodness and love. Long ago it was when, for the last time, those aged hands blessed me. Our Grandmother is no more; for many a year now she has slept beneath the cold earth. But to me she is not dead. (Němcová, 2011, p 9)

Němcová often travelled and was a skilful collector of folk stories and traditions; it is therefore highly plausible that the book is based on (at least mostly) her folk tale collections rather than solely her autobiography. The text consists of vaguely related events from the Grandmother's life along a fluid chronological timeline, starting when she receives the invitation from her daughter and ending at her own funeral. Particular events, such as visits to different neighbours, are used as a matrix for detailed descriptions of folk wisdom, traditions, proverbs, beliefs and practices, conserving and transferring history, norms, religious/spiritual practices and values of the time (Lotman, 1990, in Málek, 2013).

Several online reviewers compare *The Grandmother* to Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868). As Lynne Cantwell from the Goodreads online community puts it: 'Alcott's tale about Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy went a long way towards forming my ideas about fairness, kindness, and how to get along in life. *The Grandmother* serves the same purpose in the Czech Republic'. Indeed, rather than a novel the book is a catalogue of folk and religious wisdom and practices. Almost every page features one or two moral principles or codes of conduct, presented in the form of a story. That is why it is not possible to simply synthesise the plot; describing the sequence of the events will not do the book justice.

The readership: appraisal and critique

Němcová's work is introduced to young children in the Czech Republic in kindergartens and primary schools in the form of her fairy-tale collection. Second graders are assigned *The Grandmother* as obligatory reading in Czech language and literature courses and it is a frequent topic for the secondary school leaving exam (*maturita*), which institutionalises its importance in the course of early socialisation. The fact that Němcová was a successful female author in the 19th century is appealing to modern readership as a representation of gendered agency against the odds of the historical and individual circumstances.

The international online community of reviewers ranges from fans – ‘Anyone who grew up with a Bubbi [‘grandmother’ in Yiddish] should love this book. It is like a page out of their history’ (Christa A. Elliot, Amazon.com; cf. Mestheneos and Svensson-Dianellou, 2004) – to those who suggest: ‘do NOT read it ... EVER ... Only if you want to be ... bored to death’ (Jan Ryšavý, Goodreads, emphasis in original).

Part of the criticism of the book can be ascribed to false expectations fed by the aforementioned general belief that *The Grandmother* is a biographical account, so the absence of a general plot or story may come as a surprise to many. On the other hand, some commentators mention the importance of ‘growing into it’ and the need to have some developmental capacity to appraise it in its fullness. This reveals two points relevant for our discussion here. First, even when this book ‘is known to literally every Czech child’ (Fraňková, 2007), it is not always the most valued and generally accepted reading so the ideal of kindness and unconditional love and acceptance comes under scrutiny. Second, knowledge of the actual content of the book varies and is subject to factors such as when it is read, by whom, in which version (original, modernised, abbreviated, seen at the movies and so on) and underlying values and norms related to not only literature but also intergenerational relationships, particularly one’s own family ties. What we witness in the public, semantic realm is not always a ‘true’ picture of the story as it has been written but rather a superstructure of interpretations and memories embedded in social structures.

The Grandmother as a cultural phenomenon

At 14 Na Příkopech Street (one of the most expensive streets in Prague), amid the shop windows filled with global fashion brands you will find a bust of Němcová, with a dedication ‘to the maker of *The Grandmother*’, installed by the Central Fellowship of Czech Women. This house, in which Němcová died in 1862, is today a three-storey toyshop. If you drive through Polná, a city of 5,000 inhabitants, you can find a statue of Němcová erected in 2017 at the expense of a private ‘businessman with family’ to commemorate the 177th anniversary of Němcová’s move to Polná, where she lived for two years. If you open an issue of the daily paper *Metro*, you see a large picture of the life-sized sculptures of the literary heroine, her grandchildren and two dogs in the green meadow ‘Grandmother’s Valley’ – part of an advertisement for ‘the 53 most beautiful places to see in the Czech Republic’. If you ride the ‘readers’ tram’ in the city of Brno, which covered in pictures of books advertising the local

library, *The Grandmother* would be there. She also features in online discussions of older people's sex lives:

Our perception of grandfathers and grandmothers is traditionally asexual – we associate them with wisdom, contemplation, or dullness, but we reluctantly admit their loving desires. 'Can you imagine how the grandmother of Božena Němcová ... masturbates at night?', queries the famous sexologist Petr Weiss. 'For most people, such an idea is not very comfortable. But it is likely that she masturbated – she was fifty-three and lived without a partner.' (Třešňák, 2014)

Partridge's (1999) book review represents an outsider's look at the legacy of Němcová and her writings in Czech culture by summarising *The Grandmother* as 'perhaps the best known and best loved work in all of Czech literature' and claiming its importance 'can hardly be exaggerated' (p 2). He continues:

The book has appeared in countless editions, there are several film versions ... and *Babiccino údolí* (Grandmother's Valley), not far from the town of Nachod, is a national literary and historical monument. ... In fact, the book is so much a part of the *national consciousness* that almost *every portrayal* of a grandmother in film, on stage or in a book is influenced, and to some extent overshadowed, by Němcová's heroine. (p 2; emphasis added).

The book has been published in nearly 350 editions and been the subject of dozens of theatre productions and several film adaptations (Málek, 2013).

In 2007, for the first time ever, an adaptation of *The Grandmother* reached the stage of the Czech National Theatre. On this occasion, two accounts of the Grandmother personification were offered in media coverage of the event (Fraňková, 2007). The first came from the scriptwriter and the second from leading female actor Vlasta Chramostová, for whom this was her last active role in the theatre:

We concentrated on the character of the grandmother. We see her as a woman who struggled for her whole life and who always defended her own opinions. This theme is often hidden behind the idyllic interpretation of the

grandmother. Another important theme is the religious life and the joys of everyday life typical for the Biedermeier period. And lastly, we discovered the theme of women's destiny that intersects the whole book. How the world of women is confronted with the male world and the world of politics. (Lenka Kolihová-Havliková (scriptwriter), in Fraňková, 2007)

Babicka [The Grandmother] has always represented a source of special emotion for me ... The book has always helped us through difficult times. ... I want to remove some of the pathos because the Grandmother was essentially a working woman, very strong and full of wisdom. There is an Arabic proverb saying that eyes that have cried a lot see a lot. I think that applies to the Grandmother and to Božena Němcová as well. (Vlasta Chramostova, actor, in Fraňková, 2007)

In these two excerpts we can see how the notion of the Grandmother is developed; some features are stressed while others are intentionally suppressed. One intriguing point expressed here is the need to deal with the 'idealisation' of the epitome of grandmotherhood – filled with pathos and efforts to overcome the 'typical' – and the difficulty of doing so. This supports the argument concerning the sacred qualities of the text, which therefore should not (and could not) be taken lightly or without the proper respect. This interpretation is supported by the call for help from Němcová in tough times, for both the individual and the nation ('us'), as something close to the practice of prayer. In this view, the Grandmother is more than the personification of familial norms; she represents wider societal and national ideals (Sedmidubský, 1991, in Málek, 2013). In our cultural data from the online book reviews, this sacralisation is reflected in recommendations to read *The Grandmother* by or for Czech migrants who have lost the ability to speak Czech or for/from their children, who long for Czech national identity or simply recognise their cultural roots in the country.

Němcová was the product of her era and milieu and was well known for her nationalist activism in the Czech National Revival cultural movement. This is highly visible in the majority of her stories and novels and also manifests in the story of the Grandmother. František Halas, in his book *Our Lady Božena Němcová* (1940), even draws a parallel between the unfortunate destiny of Němcová and the unfortunate history of the Czech nation. In many ways, this comparison reflects the expectations inherent in the symbolic

grandparental roles of historian, teacher and keeper of wisdom, helping future generations re-engage with the past (Bengtson, 1985; Block, 2000; Wilton and Davey, 2006).

The lived phenomenon: the Grandmother in contemporary grandparenting identity

We now turn to interrogating how the 'ideal type' or archetypal grandmother is used by young-old women and men in the interviews for our research project, 'Role overload: Grandparenting in the era of active ageing'. We undertook secondary analysis of data consisting of 30 semistructured qualitative interviews, conducted with 32 grandparents in 2013 and 2014 in the Czech Republic. The sample includes 21 women and 11 men, aged 56 to 82 years, with a mean age of 65. Most participants can be called 'third agers', as the original project's purposeful sampling focused on people who were combining several social roles (such as grandparenting, care for older people, paid and unpaid work, leisure and civic activities) and dealt with the question of how people cope with the potential risks of conflicting demands on their time and role overload. During the interviews, participants described their everyday practices in relation to and beyond their grandparenting experience, with a focus on the personal meaning of these practices. The semistructured interviews also included questions inviting participants to compare their own grandparenting role performance to those of their spouses, parents and grandparents. This approach gave us particularly fruitful insights into perceptions of the grandparent role in dynamic relation to historical-institutional structures and cultural images our participants could relate to – or wished to distance themselves from.

To portray and relate to the various figures of grandparents, participants often used terms that were close to the aforementioned archetypal language and portrayals. The idea of addressing these terms analytically as archetypes was also supported by the fact that some of them appeared in the interviews repeatedly – primarily the 'typical grandmother' – and were used as a narrative shortcut; a tool to strengthen mutual understanding within the interview situation. Participants relied on these figures as something intersubjectively shared and comprehensible. For the purpose of this chapter, we have thus used the technique of focused coding (Charmaz, 2006) and looked closer at those parts of the data in which particular persons were described and characterised as grandmothers, paying attention to what adjectives were used in connection to grandmothering and

what meanings could be derived from the wider context of the interview.

The Grandmother from Němcová's book was spontaneously mentioned twice; in both cases, the reference was used to depict the difference between the archetypal literary figure of the Grandmother and the real-life person, especially in terms of the image of old age it portrayed:

'Well, my mother, she was, not such a typical little old lady. She looked quite young and she had a good sense of humour. When she died, I was arranging the funeral and I had to change it [the funeral service speech], because it opened with the citation from the Grandmother by Božena Němcová, as it starts with: "It was long, long ago, when last I gazed on that wrinkled face", so, no, no, that cannot stay there, it's really dull [it is not her].' (Mrs Nikola, 74)

'For example, that complaint that babysitting grandmothers do not exist anymore ... we have them in the fitness centres; they look after themselves. Božena Němcová's Grandmother, supposedly she was fifty when she came to Bělidlo [to live with her daughter]; well today in their fifties, women are at their best age.' (Mrs Dana, 62)

The literary character of the Grandmother serves in both of these cases to show what a third person (not the interviewee herself) does *not* represent; to depict the strong difference from the generally accepted ideal image of a woman with a "wrinkled face". In the second quote, the image of the Grandmother helps Mrs Dana to describe the changing relation between chronological age and expected appearance, but also to point out that being 50 means dramatically different things nowadays than at the time of Božena Němcová. More importantly, not only are the women not 'really' old but also they are at their "best age"; however, they do not participate in caring for grandchildren in the same way, as they have chosen to work on the personal project of the Self (pursuing fitness and taking care of themselves and their appearance).

The interpretation of this noncompliance with the imagined older version of grandmotherhood that emanates from the interviews is twofold: there is both the morality of performing 'young', even at ages that used to be seen as 'old', and the immorality of not being available for babysitting, which seen as a traditional feature of grandparental

performance. However, as we see from the book, the Grandmother was not babysitting – she was co-residing with the children and helping to take care of the house in her own autonomous, almost managerial way. Their time together wasn't arranged as some special 'sitting' time but was incorporated into early-modern rural everydayness in a differently structured way. As many of the stories described in the book involve visits to neighbours and other outdoor activities *together* with the grandchildren, we could even see the Grandmother performing the grandparenthood not as *opposition to* but as *part of* her active ageing, similarly to today's grandparents (Vidovičová et al., 2015). However, because the Grandmother serves as a counterpoint to contemporary grandmothers in the interviews, she appears there as physically and visually old: she has a wrinkled face and is fragile, ascetic and austere.

The second quotation also links the archetypal grandmother to her contemporary counterpart in its complaint that the babysitting grandmother is extinct. Not everyone agrees that all grandmothers have moved from the kitchen to the fitness centre, as the quotation exaggeratedly suggests; however, many make the same point about generational differences, as the same chronological age now has tremendously different connotations – those in their fifties and sixties are now seen (oxymoronically) as 'young-old' people, which enables them to care more intensively for their grandchildren (if they already have some), the older generation or their partners, as well as to dedicate their time to various other activities. As Hasmanová Marhánková (2010) has shown in her research, the 'active grandmother' might stand in symbolic opposition to the 'typical grandmother', connecting activity almost exclusively with self-development, public involvement and leisure rather than with caring for others and activities connected with domesticity.

Like Mrs Dana, Mr Gregor also values his mother as a grandmother for her difference from the narrative figure of "women today", as she performs almost the living ideal – higher age connects with wisdom, indulgence and a caring attitude towards others. She is almost "disappearing" due to her old age; thus, she can be compared to the archetypal grandmother, essentialised in the expression "a grandmother is simply a grandmother". Her performance is also highly gendered, in Mr Gregor's view – while being a caring grandfather (divorced and actively spending time with his six grandchildren), he still performs his role in tandem with her:

'She [my mother] is such an interesting person, she remains very wise until an advanced age, very hospitable, praised by

everyone; a grandmother is simply a grandmother. She is disappearing, but she is that type of grandmother. ... [She manages to cook for children,] on top of that, she [also] makes buns for them. It is interesting, the women today, I don't say they don't cook enough, but ... the simple quark cakes or pie, the kids love it and it is way better than pizza or something like that.' (Mr Gregor, 67)

Ideal-typical grandmotherhood is tightly knit with not only specific practices, including transformation of the materiality of food, but also a certain level of frugality and caring for kids and family, as well as for mundane objects:

'My old grandmother ... she was going to church; she was really kind, for family. I always say, we came there, she was standing at the doorstep and wherever you looked, there were cakes, [and] an abundant lunch. She was typical [grandmother]. I am not like that anymore.' (Mrs Doubravka, 62)

'These things that are expected from grandmothers, I haven't developed them ... like, grandmother bakes buns ... and repairs socks, I don't know, these qualities. She cooks the best meals in the world. I mean, I am a good cook, but ... I cook more these fast meals, not the grandmotherly sirloin cream sauce, right? Something based on my fantasy or oriental food ... I am not that typical grandmother in terms of cooking.' (Mrs Alžběta, 59)

We can see that the complex practices of food preparation serve as a reference point for the expression of contemporary grandmothers' identities: "I am not that kind of grandmother anymore". The archetypal grandmother belongs to the past. She is a person close to the interviewee in her familiarity, and her characteristics are positively valued, but she also represents a distant ideal that interviewees do not – and, importantly, do not *wish* to – comply with. As in the book, food plays a highly symbolic role in the narratives. While Mr Gregor uses the example of cooking and baking to appraise his mother and differentiate the image of her he portrays from his critical representation of contemporary grandmothers, Mrs Doubravka and Mrs Alžběta also use the example of cooking and baking to positively evaluate someone else as a "typical" grandmother – but actively

dissociate themselves from this archetypal performance. They bake and cook as well, but the difference lies in *how* the food is prepared, its *centrality* for the grandmothering role and how it is perceived both personally and retrospectively.

In Božena Němcová's book, the baking of bread plays a key role in the story and serves as a marker of generations and eras: a time of tradition (as represented by the grandmother) and modernity (represented by the daughter's family life). The Grandmother teaches the children how to handle bread: 'Don't you know that if one steps upon a crumb, the souls in purgatory weep?' (p 18). The baking of bread or sweets, an example of grandmotherly ruling over materiality, is a point at which tradition and modernity meet; at which the mundane matter of food is placed in the sacred context of wider cosmology and the grandmother introduces children to tradition and everyday 'mystique' (or vice versa – makes them see the mystical in the everyday).

In the interviews, the 'right', positively valued care performance is usually represented by women's 'traditional' preparation of time-consuming, complex, nationalised cuisine. As Mintz and Bois (2002) point out: 'Like all culturally defined material substances used in the creation and maintenance of social relationships, food serves both to solidify group membership and to set groups apart' (p 109). Thus, it cannot be a "pizza" but must be *buchty* (a special kind of local sweet yeast bun filled with poppy seeds, quark or plum butter) or the national Czech dish *svíčková* (beef tenderloin in cream sauce). Mrs Alžběta also reflects how "typical grandmothering" is not only connected with tradition but also manifests in the form of the perceived social norm of doing those "things that are expected from the grandmothers". In her negation, however, we can also feel a certain level of pride; her noncompliance with ideal-typical features does not threaten her personal identity – she does not identify with that ideal – rather, she uses it as a meaningful departure point for her personal grandmotherhood narrative, which is constructed around the realms of occupation and personal creativity.

Conclusions

We have sketched a portrait of a 160-year-old cultural artefact that is still alive today in various public discourses and spaces, school curricula, media coverage and, last but not least, lay actors' self-perceptions and identities. We have shown how the artefact emerged from a specific historical context and how it is kept alive and transformed through a

variety of discursive channels. Šindar (2009), in his TV documentary that artistically maps the discrepancies between the Grandmother and older women of today, talks about “a perfect national myth”, “a romantic model”, “a mythological figure in realistic shape and configuration”, “a national grandmother” and “a prototype”. Together, these features may provide a somewhat false feeling that *The Grandmother* has the quality of a cult. That is not the case. Yet, we have found this approach very fruitful in identifying both obvious and unspoken features of ideal grandmotherhood, which is, of course, ‘too good’ to be real, but which still hangs above the heads of present-day grandmothers in the Czech Republic.

Over the course of gerontology’s longstanding interest in grandparenting, and grandmotherhood particularly, many typologies and categorisations have been produced to describe various patterns of grandparenting, the different roles grandparents play in contemporary families and the diversity of meanings attached to this role, by grandparents themselves or by others, in relation to particular societal, cultural and historical contexts. Timonen and Arber (2012) have traced ‘types’ or ‘styles’ of grandparenting back to the 1960s (referencing Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1985; Neugarten and Weinstein, 1964) and critically appraised them: ‘[T]hese categorisations are not well suited to examining possible differences in how a grandparent relates to different grandchildren, and also overlook the possibility that grandchildren may exert an influence on the nature of the relationship’ (Timonen and Arber, 2012, p 7).

The problem with typologies is that they tend to reify particular perspectives by creating conceptual boundaries around practices and meanings that in lived social reality are usually permeable, interchangeable and far more fluid. Nonetheless, simplifications and taxonomic approaches are at the very heart of both scientific and lay thinking; they enable us to communicate, organise and share complex ideas. Furthermore, as we have tried to show in this chapter, they are also a vivid part of thinking and talking about grandparenting in the form of archetypes based on shared cultural images. The aim here is not to create another category, solidifying the patterns of grandparental role performances, but to show how contemporary Czech grandmothers relate to the existing cultural image of the Grandmother and idealised grandmotherhood, actively using its features to delineate their own understandings of the grandparenting role, as well as to outline its embeddedness in local social and historical contexts.

We have shown that the ‘purity’ and the ‘sacredness’ of the grandmother archetype make it available for positive evaluation of

other women's grandmothering performance, but also make it difficult to comply with the ideal – and possible to distance oneself from it. Noncompliance plays an ambivalent role in the narratives. On the one hand, the ideal serves as a reference point that is expected to be part of shared structures of meaning, as it is interwoven with one of the major national narratives of the Czech imagined community. Both men and women use the 'typical grandmother' to portray an image they expect the audience/interviewer to understand; it represents everything that ought to, but cannot, be reached. On the other hand, older women use this idealised form as a departure point for framing grandmothering practices that may be far from 'the ideal' but generally reflect their positive self-image as modern grandmothers.

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Note

¹ In this chapter, we use the capitalised noun 'Grandmother' for the instances in which we are referring to the literary heroine, to distinguish it from 'grandmother' as a social and family role and related meanings.

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