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Intergenerational transmission of relationship quality in later-life families

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Abstract

Objective: This article examines the transmission of older women's relationship quality with their mothers and fathers to their relationship quality with their own adult children in midlife. We also investigate how the transmission is moderated by the dimension of relationship quality (closeness vs. strain) and the gender of both the older women's parents and their adult children.

Background: Prior research has primarily examined parents' transmission of relationship quality to young children with little attention to whether and when this pattern occurs in later-life families.

Method: We conducted multilevel analyses using data collected from 249 older women and 643 of their adult children as part of the Within-Family Differences Study-I.

Results: We found evidence for transmission of older women's reported closeness and tension with their mothers and fathers to their reported closeness and tension with their adult children. Adult children's reports also revealed that older women's closeness with their own mothers was transmitted to their adult children's reported closeness with the older women themselves. Mother–child closeness was transmitted more strongly than mother–child tension, and mother–child closeness was transmitted more strongly to daughters than sons, based on adult children's reports.

Conclusion: This study demonstrates the continuity of intergenerational influence in later-life families and highlights the essential roles that selective social learning and social structural position (i.e., gender) play in conditioning the socialization process.

KEYWORDS

adult development, family processes, gender, gerontology, intergenerational relationships, socialization

INTRODUCTION

Across the past century, a large body of work has demonstrated the central role that parents play in children's social development through socialization since early life (Freud, 1933; Parsons & Bales, 1955). Studies of intergenerational influence in adulthood have shown that parents continue to be agents of socialization after their children enter adulthood. For example, parents transmit their values to their children through modeling and teaching, resulting in continuities across generations (Bengtson, 1975; Bengtson & Silverstein, 2018). Given the important role that parents play in adult children's development in these regards, it is likely that parents also transmit their patterns of interactions with their parents to their relationships with their offspring, resulting in similar development of parent–child relationship quality across generations in both childhood and adulthood.

Although scholars have made strides in studying the transmission of parent's relationship quality, most existing research has focused on the effect on young children (Donley & Likins, 2010; Grimes, 1996; Putallaz et al., 1991) or transmission of romantic or marital relationship quality in early adulthood (Amato & Booth, 2001; Goldberg et al., 2019). We know less about transmission of the quality of other relationships in middle and later adulthood, particularly the transmission of parent–child relationship quality, which plays a salient role in the well-being of both the adult children and their parents in later life families (Thomas et al., 2017).

On one hand, scholars have argued that as children age and social experience accumulates, the influence of older generations decreases (Davis, 1940; Erikson, 1959; Mancini & Blieszner, 1989). This might be especially true in later-life families as members of the grandparent generation pass away. On the other hand, a growing body of studies utilizing the life course perspective has suggested that this cumulative intergenerational influence can extend into children's mid- and later-life, even after parents' death (Bowen, 2004; Connidis, 2010).

In the only study to explore intergenerational transmission of parent–child relationship quality in adulthood, Birditt et al. (2012) found partial evidence for midlife adults transmitting the quality of their relationships with their parents to their relationships with their own young-adult children. We extend Birditt and colleagues' work in two ways. First, we explore transmission of intergenerational relationships beginning with an earlier generation, namely, older women's relationships with *their* mothers and fathers, most of whom were deceased. Evidence for intergenerational transmission, if found, could further demonstrate the persistence of cumulative socialization influences into later life, even after parent's death. Second, we examine how intergenerational transmission of relationship quality varies by the positivity and negativity of the relational dimension (i.e., closeness, tension) and the gender of both the grandparent and adult children. From an interventional perspective, understanding this issue is crucial for implementing transgenerational family therapy by helping adults recognize the within-family origin of their relational and psychological well-being (Freud, 1909; Ramisch & Nelson, 2015). By considering multiple generations and multiple members of generations, we respond to the call of recent scholars to take a broader "within-family perspective" (Suitor et al., 2018) that addresses the interconnectedness and differences in intergenerational relations within the family.

Throughout the paper, we use acronyms and refer to the older women's parents as Generation 0 (G0), the older women as Generation 1 (G1), and their adult children in midlife as Generation 2 (G2). Drawing on theories of socialization, social learning, and gender role development, we ask: (1) Is the older women's relationship quality with their mothers and fathers transmitted to their relationship quality with their adult children in midlife? (2) Does the transmission of relationship quality differ by whether the relational dimension is positive or negative? (3) Does grandparents' (G0) or adult children's (G2) gender moderate the transmission of relationship quality? To address these questions, we used data collected from 249 older women (G1s) and 643 of their adult children (G2s), collected as part of the Within-Family Differences Study-I (WFDS-I).

BACKGROUND

Intergenerational transmission of quality of interpersonal relationships in adulthood

Parents' influence on their children's social development has been a foundational topic in sociology and social psychology for more than a century, with roots tracing back to Freud and Parsons (Freud, 1933; Parsons & Bales, 1955). Socialization theory proposes that parents transmit their interaction styles and interpersonal skills to their offspring by modeling and teaching (Mead, 1934; Merton, 1957; Parsons, 1955). This process occurs as children internalize the expected ways of developing relationships through interacting with parents and observing their parents' interactions with others. Consequently, children tend to develop relationship quality that is similar to that of their parents. The life course perspective complements this framework by suggesting that life experiences of one generation affect the experiences of members of other generations, and that individual development is a life-long process wherein earlier experiences have far-reaching influences on later life (Elder et al., 2003).

Contemporary variations of socialization theory have provided complementary lenses. Classic theories of symbolic interaction suggest that children learn the meaning of intergenerational relationships through repeated interactions within the family, which leads to the habituation of similar interactional patterns across generations (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1961). Likewise, according to more contemporary Bourdieu's theories, children develop their interpretative schemata (i.e., habitus) via interactions that are reproduced across generations (Bourdieu, 1990; Lareau, 2011). Furthermore, because relationship quality predicts support exchange when needed (Thomas et al., 2017), it constitutes a form of culture and social capital transmitted generationally (Bourdieu, 1986).

Although there could be alternative explanations of intergenerational continuity, including psychophysiological and environmental influences (McEwen & McEwen, 2017), a large body of research has shown that the intergenerational continuity in relationship quality still holds even when controlling for contextual factors (Amato & Booth, 2001; Narayan et al., 2017). Furthermore, Goldberg et al. (2019) tested observational learning versus personality or environmental influences and their findings supported socialization as the major mechanism that explains intergenerational continuity of relationship quality. Thus, we draw primarily on socialization theory to build our arguments.

Earlier research drawing on socialization theories has focused on transmission of parents' relationship quality to young children. Some investigations have found evidence supporting the transmission of family relationship quality generationally (Grimes, 1996; Putallaz et al., 2001), whereas others have found that parents' negative relationship quality may not necessarily be transmitted to children if parents adopt positive childrearing strategies (Kramer & Baron, 1995; Putallaz et al., 1991). Scholars working from the life course perspective expanded this line of work to consider socialization during the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood (Lutfey & Mortimer, 2006), finding that parents transmit the quality of their marital and romantic relationships to their adult offspring (Amato & Booth, 2001; Goldberg et al., 2019).

As noted above, to date, only one study has examined the transmission of the quality of intergenerational relationships in adulthood. Using data from a study of three-generation families, Birditt et al. (2012) found that midlife adults' ratings of positive and negative relationship quality with their parents were similar to their reported relationship quality with their own children. However, other findings from the study revealed contradictory patterns, as they found that older mothers' reports of positive relationship quality with the midlife adults were associated with those midlife adults' reports of less positive relationship quality with their own young-adult children. Thus, currently, there is not a consistent picture of whether, or under what circumstances, relationship quality is transmitted intergenerationally in adulthood.

Furthermore, although this study revealed that intergenerational influence continues into children's middle and early adulthood, little is known about whether this intergenerational influence persists as the middle generation enters later adulthood. To extend knowledge in these aspects, we will begin by testing the hypothesis that:

> **H1.** Older women's (G1) relationship quality with their mothers and fathers (G0) will be transmitted to their relationship quality with their adult children in midlife.

Differential transmission

In response to a recent scholarly call for attending to issues of uncertainty and heterogeneity in socialization (Guhin et al., 2021), we investigated whether intergenerational transmission depends on the positivity/negativity of the relational dimension (closeness, tension) and differs by the gender of the grandparent and adult children.

Differential transmission by the positive or negative dimension of the relationship

A growing body of literature has demonstrated that positive and negative aspects of relationships are conceptually independent constructs that have independent effects on well-being (Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 1997). However, most prior research has either combined positive and negative relationship quality into one measure or examined only the transmission of negative relationship quality (e.g., Donley & Likins, 2010; Goldberg et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important to study the transmission of positive and negative relationship quality separately.

On one hand, literature has suggested that children tend to imitate their parent's negative behavioral patterns. The repeated exposures and interactions within the family shape children's cognitive schema, leading to similar habituated ways of developing relationships. Children can feel obliged to repeat their parents' negative interactional patterns due to self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948; Putallaz et al., 2001). For example, a large body of studies has supported intergenerational transmission of emotional insecurity (Putallaz et al., 2001), abuse (Goldberg et al., 2019; Hunter & Kilstrom, 1979), and divorce and relationship instability (Amato & Booth, 2001; Diekmann & Schmidheiny, 2013). Thus, it is possible that older women's negative relationship quality will be transmitted to adult children in a similar direction and magnitude as the transmission of positive relationship quality.

On the other hand, social learning theory posits that by observing the consequences of others' behaviors and experiencing the outcomes of one's own past actions, individuals learn to repeat behaviors with positive anticipatory outcomes and avoid those with detrimental outcomes (Bandura, 2001). Similarly, theories of role modeling propose that positive role models exemplify success, whereas negative role models motivate individuals to reflect upon and avoid such behaviors (Gibson, 2003; Lockwood et al., 2005). Furthermore, the tendency to reject parents' negative role models is particularly evident in adulthood, when independence is a developmental concern (Baltes & Carstensen, 1991; Erikson, 1959).

Because older women's positive relationships with their parents enhance their psychological well-being and lead to greater intergenerational solidarity, they are likely to consciously reinforce such interactions in relationships with their adult children. By contrast, older women's negative relationships with their parents are likely to create problems in their lives. Thus, older women who have more negative relationship quality with their parents may learn from their past experiences and strategically foster positive relationships with their children.

Likewise, older women's negative relationship quality with their parents provides opportunities for their adult children to reflect upon the consequences of such relationships and attempt to avoid imitating these patterns in their relationships with their mothers (i.e., the older women themselves).

Because there has been literature suggesting both similarity and differences in intergenerational transmission by relational dimension, we propose competing hypotheses:

> **H2a.** Older women's positive relationship quality with their mothers and fathers will be transmitted in a similar direction and magnitude as the transmission of negative relationship quality.

> **H2b.** Older women's positive relationship quality with their mothers and fathers will be transmitted more strongly to their relationship quality with their adult children in midlife than will negative relationship quality.

Differential transmission by grandparent's and adult children's gender

The literature on gender role socialization provides a strong basis to anticipate gender differences in intergenerational transmission of relationship quality. Classic theories of gender role development propose that women are socialized beginning in childhood to be especially concerned with others' emotions, which leads them to be caring and agreeable—the stereotypical feminine role as "kin-keeper" (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Kretchmar, 2014). This pattern continues into adulthood, when social influence literature in both experimental and natural settings has found that women are more invested in their social relationships than are men and are more easily influenced by those with whom they engage (Eagly, 1983; Reczek & Umberson, 2012). Feminist theories have provided similar arguments on women's sensitivity to and involvement in social relationships. By "doing" and "performing" gender, women produce and reinforce their feminine identity in repeated interactional situations (Butler, 2014; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

These theories have important implications for how intergenerational transmission of relationship quality could differ by the gender of both the grandparents (G0) and adult children (G2). First, compared to grandfathers, grandmothers have closer relationships and interact more intensively with the older women (G1) and adult children (G2) (Chan Chan & Elder Jr., 2000). Thus, it is likely that older women's relationship quality with their mothers is transmitted more strongly to their adult children than is their relationship quality with their fathers. Thus, we hypothesized that:

> **H3a.** Compared to older women's relationship quality with their fathers, older women's relationship quality with their mothers will be transmitted more strongly to their relationship with adult children.

Second, compared to sons, daughters have stronger ties with their mothers than sons, which is evident in more frequent exchanges and deeper emotional investment (Birditt et al., 2009; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997; Suitor et al., 2019). Thus, daughters' stronger bonds with mothers are likely to facilitate a stronger transmission of mothers' relationship quality to daughters than sons. In addition, similarity in family roles between older women and their daughters could play a role. In later-life families, in similar ways that older women had provided support to their mothers, adult daughters provide support to the older women (Fingerman et al., 2020). According to theories of social exchange, the similarity between older women and their daughters in their gendered family roles (e.g., caregiving) is likely to result in older women's and their daughters' similar development of intergenerational relationship quality (Homans, 1950; Lawler, 2001). Thus, we hypothesized that:

H3b. Older women's relationship quality with their mothers and fathers will be transmitted more strongly to their relationship quality with their daughters than sons.

METHODS

The data used were collected from Within-Family Differences Study-I (WFDS-I). The design of the WFDS-I involved selecting a sample of community-dwelling women 65–75 years of age who have at least two living children and collecting information from both the older women and each of their children (further details of the design can be found at https://web.ics.purdue.edu/~jsuitor/within-family-differences-study/index.html or Suitor and Pillemer (2006) and Suitor et al. (2013, 2017) where portions of this section have been published previously). Because data on older women's relationship quality with their parents were only collected at T1, we used a single wave of the data for the present study.

Procedure

Massachusetts city and town lists were used as the source of the original WFDS-I sample. With the assistance of the Center for Survey Research at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, the investigators drew a systematic sample of women aged 65–75 who have two or more children from the greater Boston area. Between 2001 and 2003, 566 older women were interviewed in person, representing 61% of those who were eligible to participate. At the end of the interviews, they were asked for the contact information of their adult children. Sixty-three percent of the older women agreed to provide contact information for their adult children, and 70% of the adult children agreed to be interviewed. Interviews with the adult children took place by telephone.

Our sample inclusion criteria were that both the older woman and at least one of her adult children must have participated in the study. Of the 299 older women and 771 of their adult children who met the criteria, we omitted seven older women and 22 of their adult children who were Asian or Hispanic, because these groups have different patterns of intergenerational relations from White or Black families and from each other (Burr & Mutchler, 1999; Kim & Wong, 2002). Thus, it would be inappropriate to combine them with either White or Black families or combine them into one category.

We used listwise deletion to handle missing data because there were fewer than 3.2% of missing data on any variable. Forty-three families were excluded due to missing data. The final analytic sample consists of 249 older women and 643 of their adult children (287 sons, 356 daughters). Although power analyses were not conducted prior to data collection or analysis, our sample size was comparable to or even larger than other studies on intergenerational transmission of relationship quality (c.f., Birditt et al., 2012; Donley & Likins, 2010; Grimes, 1996; Kramer & Baron, 1995; Putallaz et al., 2001). Furthermore, we conducted a post-hoc analysis to assess the implication of statistical power for our null findings.

Measures

We used closeness and tension as single-item measures of positive and negative relationship quality, the validity of which has been widely recognized (Aquilino, 1994; Spitze & Trent, 2006). Specifically, closeness contributes to positive aspects of psychological well-being whereas tension is found to predict distress (Lee & Szinovacz, 2016). Rather than measuring the frequency of specific behaviors, these measures capture more global aspects of affectual solidarity, consistent with theories of intergenerational solidarity (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997).

Our original measures of relationship quality based on 7-point scales were skewed (skewness ranged from −2.24 to 1.86). Because regression based on the means is not accurate when data are skewed (Wooldridge, 2016), we handled skewness by collapsing the three categories along the longer tails to make the scale range from 1 to 5, following the approach taken by previous studies (M. Gilligan et al., 2015; Sechrist et al., 2011; Suitor et al., 2011).

Dependent variables

Our dependent variables were closeness and tension between the older women (G1) and their children in midlife (G2) as reported by both generations. We conducted analyses using both generations' reports because this approach allows us to assess the influences of generational position in intergenerational transmission.

Positive relationship quality (i.e., closeness) between older women and their adult children (G1-G2 closeness) as reported by older women and as reported by adult children. Both the older women and their adult children were asked: "Use any number from 1 to 7, where 1 is very distant and 7 is very close. What number would you use to describe the relationship between you and (child's name /your mother) nowadays?" Because these two measures were negatively skewed, we collapsed the lowest three categories.

Negative relationship quality (i.e., tension) between older women and their adult children (G1-G2 tension) as reported by older women and as reported by adult children. Both the older women and their adult children were asked: "Use any number from 1 to 7, where 1 is not at all tense and strained and 7 is very tense and strained. What number would you use to describe how tense and strained the relationship between you and (child's name/your mother) is nowadays?" Because these two measures were positively skewed, we took a similar approach and combined the highest three categories.

Independent variables

Our independent variables were older women's closeness and tension with their own mothers and fathers (G0s) as reported only by the older women (G1). In 94% of the cases, the G0 mothers were deceased, and in 98% of the cases, the G0 fathers were deceased. Thus, in most cases, the G1 women were retrospectively reporting on their relationship quality with their parents. We tailored the questions to accommodate the mortality status of their mothers/fathers.

Positive relationship quality (i.e., closeness) between older women and their mothers/fathers. The older women were asked "What number would you use to describe the relationship between you and your mother/father figure nowadays/around the time of her death? 1 = very distant… 7 = very close." Because the original measures were negatively skewed, we combined the lowest three categories.

Negative relationship quality (i.e., tension) between older women and their mothers/fathers. "What number would you use to describe how tense and strained the relationship between you and your mother/father figure is nowadays/was around the time of her death? 1 = not at all tense and strained… 7 = very tense and strained." We combined the highest three categories to adjust for positive skewness.

Moderators

The moderators examined in this study are (a) The relational dimension (closeness, tension); and (b) grandparents' and adult children's gender. As shown above, our variables measured

each dimension of relationship quality (closeness, tension) for each type of grandparent (grandmother, grandfather) separately, which allowed us to compare transmission strength by relational dimension and grandparents' gender. In addition, we measured adult children's gender using older women's reports of the adult child as 0 = son, 1 = daughter.

Control variables

Older women (G1) and family-level characteristics. *Race* was measured by asking the respondents to select from a card listing several races and ethnicities. We coded those who identified themselves as Black (or Black and another race/ethnicity) as 1 = Black and those who identified themselves as White as 0 = White. *Family size* was measured by the older women's reports of their total number of living adult children. To measure *educational attainment*, older women were asked whether they had completed: less than high school (1), 1–3 years high school (2), high school graduate (3), post high-school vocational school (4), some college (5), college graduate (6), or graduate school (7). Literature has documented that losing parents affects adults' assessment of relationship quality both with their deceased parent and their own children (Boerner & Heckhausen, 2010; Bowen, 2004; Kim et al., 2019); thus, we controlled for *G0's mortality status*, which was coded as 0 = alive, 1 = deceased.

Adult child (G2) level characteristics. The child's *age* was calculated by subtracting the child's year of birth from the year of the interview. Child's *marital status* was coded as 0 = not married, 1 = married.

Analytic plan

Because the 643 adult children were nested within 249 families, we used multilevel linear models, which account for correlated error structure. Because our explanatory variable, older women's (G1) relationship quality with their own mothers (G0), was measured at the older women-level (equivalent to family level), we used models with random intercepts.

To test intergenerational transmission of relationship quality, we used older women's relationship quality with their mothers and fathers (G0-G1 relationship quality) to predict their relationship quality with their adult children in midlife (G1-G2 relationship quality).

To make it easier for readers to identify how intergenerational transmission works differently for each relational dimension and by grandparent's and adult child's gender, we conducted separate analyses and tested the moderation effect by comparing regression coefficients across models with t statistics (Clogg et al., 1995). We corrected heteroskedasticity by using robust standard errors (Wooldridge, 2016). All analyses were conducted using Stata 17.

RESULTS

Descriptive and correlational analyses

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and demographic characteristics of the older women and their adult children in our sample.

Older women's closeness and tension with their mothers were highly negatively correlated ($r = -0.52$), and so were their closeness and tension with their fathers ($r = -0.64$). Older women's reported closeness and tension with their adult children were highly correlated ($r = -0.66$), and adult children's reported closeness and tension with older women were moderately correlated ($r = -0.45$).

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics of older women and their adult children

	Mean/% (SD)
Older women (G1) and family level characteristics (N = 249)	
Older women reported closeness with mothers (G1 re G0–G1 closeness)	4.15 (1.34)
Older women reported tension with mothers (G1 re G0–G1 tension)	1.96 (1.54)
Older women reported closeness with fathers (G1 re G0–G1 closeness)	3.98 (1.33)
Older women reported tension with fathers (G1 re G0–G1 tension)	1.83 (1.37)
Age	70.01 (3.12)
Education	
Less than high school	16.87
High school or vocational	40.16
1–3 years college	19.28
4+ years college	23.69
Own mother deceased (ref: alive)	94.70
Own father deceased (ref: alive)	98.39
Black (ref: White)	17.67
Family size	3.74 (1.71)
Adult child (G2) and Dyad level characteristics (N = 643)	
Older women reported closeness with adult children (G1 re G1–G2 closeness)	4.32 (1.07)[a]
Older women reported tension with adult children (G1 re G1–G2 tension)	1.82 (1.28)[b]
Adult children reported closeness with older women (G2 re G1–G2 closeness)	3.81 (1.31)[a]
Adult children reported tension with older women (G2 re G1–G2 tension)	2.11 (1.36)[b]
Daughter	55.37
Age	42.40 (5.7)
Married	63.92

Note: We use abbreviations and refer to the older women's own mothers and fathers as G0, the older women as G1, and their adult children in midlife as G2. All measures of relationship quality were based on the transformed scale (range: 1–5). [a,b]Significant differences in older women's and adult children's reported older women-adult child (G1–G2) relationship quality using paired sample *t*-tests.
[a]Older women reported higher closeness with adult children than adult children reported with the older women ($t = 9.19$, $p < 0.01$).
[b]Older women reported lower tension with adult children than adult children reported with the older women ($t = -4.75$, $p < 0.01$).

Comparing the older women's and adult children's reports of relationship quality with each other, older women reported higher closeness ($t = 9.19$, $p < 0.01$) and lower tension ($t = -4.75$, $p < 0.01$) with adult children than adult children's reports of their relationship quality with the older women, consistent with generational stake theory (Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971).

Regarding gender differences in reported relationship quality, compared to sons, adult daughters reported greater closeness with older women ($t = 5.69$, $p < 0.001$). However, no significant differences between older women's reported closeness or tension with their daughters and sons were found, nor differences between older women's reported closeness or tension with their mothers and fathers.

Regression analyses

Table 2 presents mixed linear model estimates predicting the closeness and tension between the older women and their children in midlife (G1–G2 closeness and tension), stratified by G0 grandparent's gender. All interpretations of the effect sizes were based on the transformed 5-point scale.

TABLE 2 Mixed models predicting G1–G2 closeness and tension as reported by older women (G1) and as reported by their adult children (G2), stratified by the grandparent (G0)'s gender ($N = 643$ adult children nested within 249 older women)

	Grandmother ties				Grandfather ties			
	G1 re G1–G2		G2 re G1–G2		G1 re G1–G2		G2 re G1–G2	
Variables	Closeness Model 1	Tension Model 2	Closeness Model 3	Tension Model 4	Closeness Model 5	Tension Model 6	Closeness Model 7	Tension Model 8
Older women (G1) and family level characteristics								
G0–G1 closeness	0.10*		0.12**[a]		0.14**		0.05	
	(0.05)		(0.04)		(0.04)		(0.04)	
G0–G1 tension		0.09*[b]		−0.01[ab]		0.12**		0.02
		(0.04)		(0.04)		(0.04)		(0.05)
G1's education	−0.06*	0.02	−0.10**	0.09*	−0.06	0.03	−0.11**	0.09*
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)
G0 deceased	−0.46*	0.19	−0.16	0.15	−0.16	−0.79	−0.43	0.10
	(0.19)	(0.23)	(0.21)	(0.29)	(0.60)	(0.54)	(0.46)	(0.79)
Black	−0.06	0.10	0.05	−0.06	−0.10	0.07	−0.02	−0.07
	(0.17)	(0.17)	(0.19)	(0.20)	(0.17)	(0.17)	(0.19)	(0.20)
Family size	0.04	−0.05	−0.00	−0.03	0.05*	−0.05	0.01	−0.03
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Adult child (G2) level characteristics								
Daughter	0.17*	−0.17	0.59**	−0.03	0.17*	−0.16	0.58**	−0.03
	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.11)	(0.12)
Age	−0.00	0.01	−0.03**	0.01	−0.00	0.01	−0.03**	0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Married	0.22*	−0.62**	−0.01	−0.43**	0.22*	−0.62**	−0.02	−0.43**
	(0.09)	(0.12)	(0.10)	(0.12)	(0.09)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.12)

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$.
[a]Significant difference across relationship dimensions (closeness vs. tension) at $p < 0.05$.
[b]Significant difference by the generation of the reporter (older women vs. adult children) at $p < 0.05$.

Models 1–4 present results for transmission of older women's relationship quality with their mothers (i.e., G0 grandmothers) to their relationship quality with their adult children. As shown in Models 1 and 3, a one-unit increase in older women's closeness with their mothers was associated with a 0.10 unit increase in their reported closeness with their children ($p < 0.05$, Model 1) and a 0.12 unit increase in their adult children's reported closeness with the older women themselves ($p < 0.01$, Model 3). As shown in Models 2 and 4, older women's tension with their mothers (G0–G1 tension) predicted their reported tension with their adult children (G1–G2 tension) (β=0.09, $p < 0.05$, Model 2), whereas no substantial association was found between older women's tension with their mothers and adult children's reported tension with the older women themselves ($\beta = -0.01$, n.s., Model 4).

Models 5–6 present results for transmission of older women's relationship quality with their fathers (i.e., G0 grandfathers) to their relationship quality with their adult children. As shown in Models 5 and 7, a one-unit increase in older women's closeness with their father was associated with 0.14 unit increase in their reported closeness with their adult children ($p < 0.01$, Model 5), whereas no substantial association was found between older women's reported closeness with their fathers and their adult children's reported closeness with the older women

themselves ($\beta = 0.05$, n.s., Model 7). Models 6 and 8 suggested that older women's tension with their fathers predicted their reported tension with their adult children ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.01$, Model 6), but it did not significantly predict adult children's reported tension with the older women themselves ($\beta = 0.02$, n.s., Model 8).

Next, we tested differences in transmission of intergenerational closeness and tension. The association between older women's closeness with their mothers and their children's reported closeness with the older women themselves ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < 0.01$, Model 3) was stronger than the association between the older women's tension with their mothers and their children's reported tension with the older women themselves ($\beta = -0.01$, n.s., Model 4; $t = 2.3$, $p < 0.05$). However, comparisons of the transmission of closeness to the transmission of tension based on older women's reports did not suggest significant differences in these associations; nor did the difference between the transmission of older women's closeness and tension with their fathers.

To test how intergenerational transmission depends on the grandparent's gender, we compared the transmission of older women's relationship quality with their mothers to the transmission of their relationship quality with their fathers based on the same relational dimension and generation reporter (comparing Models 1–4 with 5–8). However, none of these comparisons showed significant differences.

Finally, to test how intergenerational transmission depends on the adult child's gender, we stratified our sample by adult child's gender and repeated the analyses above in son and daughter samples separately. We began by examining differences in transmission of older women's closeness with their mothers to their closeness with daughters and sons. Table 3 presents mixed linear model estimates predicting the closeness between the older women (G1) and their sons and daughters in midlife (G2).

As hypothesized, older women's closeness with their mothers predicted their reported closeness with daughters, as reported by both the older women and their daughters ($\beta = 0.11$, $p \leq 0.05$, Model 2, older women's reports; $\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$, Model 4, daughters' reports). However, older women's closeness with their mothers did not predict their closeness with their sons, based on either the older women's or their sons' reports (Models 1 & 3, n.s.). Furthermore, the association between older women's closeness with their mothers and their daughters' reported closeness with the older women themselves was stronger than the association between older women's closeness with their mothers and their sons' reported closeness with the older women themselves ($\beta = 0.04$, n.s., Model 3, sons' reports; $\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$, Model 4, daughters' reports; $t = 1.78$, $p < 0.05$; Table 3). This gender difference, however, was not evident based on older women's reports of closeness with their adult children. We also tested the differences between coefficients across sons' and daughters' models in transmission of older women's tension with their mothers and transmission of their closeness and tension with their fathers. However, none of these comparisons revealed substantial differences by adult children's gender (results not shown).

Sensitivity and supplementary analyses

To test the potential influences of measurement transformation and model specification (Appendix S1), we re-estimated our models using the original 7-point scale (Table S1.1) and multilevel ordered logistic models (Table S1.2). In addition, we tested the moderation effect of adult children's gender by adding an interaction term of G0–G1 relationship quality with adult children (G2)'s gender (Table S1.3). Findings from these analyses were substantively the same as the models presented above.

We also conducted a series of supplementary analyses (Appendix S2). We followed the approach proposed by Goldberg et al. (2019) to test environmental and personality influences that may explain intergenerational continuity of relationship quality. However, no evidence

TABLE 3 Mixed models predicting G1–G2 closeness as reported by older women (G1) and their adult children (G2), stratified by adult children's gender ($N = 643$ adult children [287 sons, 356 daughters])

	Grandmother ties (G2 re G1–G2)			
	Older women (G1)'s reports of G1–G2 closeness		Adult children (G2)'s reports of G1–G2 closeness	
Variables	Son Model 1	Daughter Model 2	Son Model 3	Daughter Model 4
Older women (G1) and family level characteristics				
G0 grandmother-G1 closeness	0.10	0.11*	0.04[a]	0.17**[a]
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.05)
G1's education	−0.11**	0.00	−0.09	−0.09
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)
G0 deceased	−0.77**	−0.30	−0.33	−0.03
	(0.18)	(0.24)	(0.26)	(0.33)
Black	−0.19	0.06	0.03	0.03
	(0.23)	(0.20)	(0.26)	(0.22)
Family size	0.04	0.04	−0.04	0.02
	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.06)	(0.03)
Adult child (G2) level characteristics				
Age	−0.01	0.01	−0.04*	−0.02
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Married	0.14	0.34**	−0.17	0.12
	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.16)	(0.12)

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$.
[a]Significant difference across adult children's gender at $p \leq 0.05$.

supported environmental or personality influences explanations for intergenerational continuity of relationship quality (Appendix S2.1). We also assessed the extent to which intergenerational transmission varies by adult children's age (Table S2.2) and grandparent's mortality status (Table S2.3). Details of these additional analyses can be found in Supporting Information online.

Finally, we conducted a post-hoc analysis to calculate the smallest effects that would be significant in models that suggested null findings, given the cluster size of 2.58, 249 clusters (families), and significance level at 0.05 (Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2008). Results suggested that our models had enough power (0.80) to capture hypothesized effects as small as 0.11. However, the true effect sizes were only −0.01, 0.05, and 0.02, respectively (Models 4, 7, and 8 in Table 2). Therefore, our null findings were mainly due to small effect sizes and we interpreted them from a substantive viewpoint rather than a statistical viewpoint only.

DISCUSSION

Despite the large body of work demonstrating parental influence on children's social development, including the intergenerational transmission of relationship quality to young children (Freud, 1933; Parsons & Bales, 1955), little is known about the transmission of relationship quality in later life families. On one hand, as children mature, parental influences may become muted and the influences of grandparents even more muted as members of this generation pass

away (Davis, 1940; Erikson, 1959; Mancini & Blieszner, 1989). On the other hand, life course theory and literature on the linked lives of family members suggest that intergenerational influences may last well into mid- and later-life (Elder et al., 2003; Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010).

Our goal was to extend the inquiry of intergenerational transmission of relationship quality to later-life families, starting from older women's relationships with their own mothers and fathers, most of whom were deceased, to their relationships with their own adult children in midlife. As part of this investigation, we explored how intergenerational transmission of relationship quality was shaped by social structural characteristics of the grandparents and adult children (i.e., gender) and the positivity or negativity of the relational dimension (i.e., closeness, tension). In pursuing these research questions, we respond to the call of recent scholars to take a broader "within-family perspective" (Suitor et al., 2018) to consider the interconnectedness and differences in intergenerational dynamics across multiple members and generations within the family.

Our findings on the transmission of intergenerational relationship quality demonstrated that intergenerational influence extends well into mid- and later-life, supporting our core hypothesis (H1). Specifically, we found that older women's closeness and tension with their mothers and fathers were transmitted to their reported closeness and tension with their adult children. Adult children's reports also revealed that older women's closeness with their own mothers was transmitted to their adult children's reported closeness with the older women themselves. These findings complement the literature on the continuity of family socialization across generations and the linked lives of family members across the life course (Elder et al., 2003; Lutfey & Mortimer, 2006).

Moreover, our findings shed light on the issues of selectivity and heterogeneity in socialization (Guhin et al., 2021) by revealing how intergenerational transmission depends on the relational dimension and gender. First, our hypothesis on differential transmission by relational dimension (H2b) was supported in that mother–child closeness was transmitted more strongly than was mother–child tension based on adult children's reports. This evidence complements a growing body of literature highlighting social learning and role modeling as selective processes (Baltes & Carstensen, 1991; Bandura, 2001). Second, although no differences in transmission of older women's relationship quality with their mothers and fathers were found, our hypothesis on the moderating effect of adult children's gender (H3b) was supported in that mother–child closeness was transmitted more strongly to daughters than to sons based on adult children's reports. This finding highlights how intergenerational bonds serve as channels of social norms that produce gender-specific patterns of relationship quality transmission, and therefore, complements the literature demonstrating that social influence processes are more consequential for women than men (Chodorow, 1978; Reczek & Umberson, 2012).

It is important to note that some of our findings are limited to analyses based on a particular generation's reports. For example, parent–child tension was transmitted based on older women's reports only. These patterns are consistent with the generational stake theory, suggesting that the different developmental concerns older women and their adult children have likely color their perceptions (Bengtson & Kuypers, 1971; Birditt et al., 2012). Older women are more concerned with maintaining continuities, and therefore, tend to maximize generational similarities, which could include conflictual ways of engaging in relationships. In contrast, independence is more of a developmental concern for midlife adults, who tend to perceive themselves as more reluctant to imitate their mothers' negative ways of engaging in relationships.

Further, gender differences in transmission of parent–child closeness were found based on adult children's reports only. Given older women's concerns with generational continuity, they may report their closeness with both sons and daughters as mirroring their closeness with their own mothers. For adult children, there is a gender difference in perceptions of generational influence versus independence. Because gender socialization processes emphasize independence in men and compliance in women (Chodorow, 1978; Kretchmar, 2014), daughters may perceive their relationship quality as more similar to their mothers. By contrast, the socialization of sons

towards independence may explain why sons' relationship quality was not predicted by their mothers' relationship quality.

Finally, our study highlights the need for intervention practitioners to help adults recognize the root of their interactional patterns within their family of origin. Such contemplation is the prerequisite for promoting changes via family interventions, consistent with the ideas of the stages of change model (Prochaska & Diclemente, 1986) in transgenerational family therapy (Freud, 1909; Ramisch & Nelson, 2015).

Our study suggests several avenues for future research. First, future studies can utilize longitudinal designs to shed light on the dynamic process of intergenerational transmission that begins with women's and their children's earlier stages of their lives. Second, the Within-Family Differences Study sampled families with two or more children. Future research should study the process of intergenerational transmission in one-child families. Third, future studies should expand this inquiry to other racial and ethnic groups beyond only Black and non-Hispanic White families. Fourth, recent research has revealed cohort differences in generational solidarity (Fingerman et al., 2012), suggesting that future scholars should explore the ways in which the broader social context shapes intergenerational transmission. Fifth, future studies could test intergenerational transmission of relationship quality using multi-item measures. Sixth, intergenerational transmission is also likely to apply to other types of relationships (e.g., friendship, sibling relationships), which future scholars could examine. Finally, future scholars could build on our findings to examine the most effective way and timepoint for implementing relationship and mental health interventions.

In sum, this study has shed new light on intergenerational transmission of interpersonal relationship quality by revealing the continuation of family socialization in later-life families. It highlights social learning as a selective process based on the positivity or negativity of the relational dimension, and the moderating role of social structural position (i.e., adult child's gender) in leading to heterogeneous patterns of transmission. We hope future research will build on our study to further extend the understanding of the patterns and processes of intergenerational transmission of relationship quality and its implications for well-being within families.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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