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A Gendered Perspective on Life Satisfaction and Intergenerational Relationships in the Second Half of Life

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the mutual effects of spousal life satisfaction as well as how older parents' perceptions of relationships with their adult children relate to life satisfaction four years later. Data from 1,071 married couples in the 2006 and 2010 waves of the Health and Retirement Study were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling. Findings revealed fathers' life satisfaction in 2010 was only marginally linked to his 2006 perceived support, while mothers' life satisfaction was significantly associated with higher support and lower strain. Results highlight gender differences in intergenerational relationships during later life.

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Life satisfaction; couples; dyads; intergenerational relations; social support

Introduction

Life satisfaction can be defined as the cognitive assessment of an individual's life, reflecting how closely their present self matches their envisioned ideal self (Maher & Conroy, 2017). Life satisfaction has been repeatedly demonstrated to have meaningful implications for physical health, mental health, and longevity (Diener & Chan, 2011) and hence offers an important focus area in aging societies that aim to promote not only longer lives, but better ones (West et al., 2014).

Social relationships are considered a key factor in enhancing life satisfaction and successful aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1997), a central concept in gerontology. This suggests that preserving physical and mental health, avoiding ill-health and disability, and sustaining high levels of social engagement can enhance older adults' ability to maintain a sense of purpose, independence, and overall well-being, enabling them to navigate the challenges of later life with resilience and adaptability (Greene & Cohen, 2005; Rowe & Kahn, 1997). Social workers often strive to help older adults preserve independence and well-being, and they do so by acknowledging their losses, stressors, and difficulties while also helping them to capitalize on their strengths (Greene and Cohen, 2005). In

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addition, helping older adults preserve a sense of social engagement is also considered an important practice in social work (Camacho et al., 2019), and a goal of various interventions (Cohen-Mansfield & Muff, 2022). Hence, understanding the role of support and strain in social relations is of theoretical and practical importance for social workers who work with older adults and aim to facilitate successful aging and promote well-being and satisfaction in later life.

The family system is one of the most influential contexts in which individuals develop. According to Bowen's (1966) family systems theory, the family functions as an organized unit in which family members are interdependent and affect one another. Hence, to understand individuals' emotional states, it is essential to consider other family units, including dyads and individuals, as well as the interrelationships among them. In older adulthood, as other social ties often dwindle (Carstensen & Meeks, 2021), both the marital unit (Hoppmann & Gerstorf, 2009) and the parent-child relationships gain importance (Boerner et al., 2016). The purpose of this paper is to understand the life-satisfaction of married individuals focusing on the context of their relations with their children and their mutual effect on one another.

The marital unit

Married couples often exert mutual influences on each other across various life domains. Studies identify emotional transmission and contagion as key mechanisms explaining the co-development of husbands and wives in areas such as health, well-being, and life satisfaction. In addition, shared exposure to environmental factors and a joint lifestyle are also suggested as significant contributors to their joint development (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). These processes are further reinforced by the daily interactions between spouses, which make the marital unit a critical context for the development and sharing of emotional experiences (Larson & Almeida, 1999).

Past research has predominantly focused on the transmission of negative effects between marital partners, particularly depression (e.g., Gerstorf et al., 2009). However, there is a growing need to investigate the reciprocal and joint developments of positive constructs, such as life satisfaction (King et al., 2016). Among older married couples, studies have shown that baseline life satisfaction can predict changes in a partner's life satisfaction over time. For instance, Gustavson et al. (2016) found that one spouse's life satisfaction predicted changes in their partner's life satisfaction 3 years later.

Notably, the relationship between marriage and life satisfaction appears to differ by gender. Some studies suggest a husband-driven trajectory, where husbands' depressive symptoms predict increases in wives' depressive symptoms and declines in their life satisfaction (Kouros & Cummings, 2010; Stimpson et al., 2006). Conversely, other studies point to a wife-driven

trajectory, with wives' life satisfaction influencing their husbands (King et al., 2016). Longitudinal studies highlight additional gendered patterns. For example, Chipperfield and Havens (2001) found that among individuals who lost a spouse, life satisfaction declined more sharply in men than in women. Similarly, while men's life satisfaction increased after gaining a spouse, no such pattern was observed in women. On the other hand, Mikucka (2016) reported that the life satisfaction advantage of being married diminished over time for men but remained stable for women. Supporting these findings, Ma and Gu (2023) examined the link between life satisfaction and mortality, discovering that life satisfaction served as a protective factor for "currently-not-married" women and for older men, regardless of marital status. Given these gendered patterns, this study aimed to examine the mutual effects of life satisfaction among married men and women from a gendered perspective.

Older parents and adult children

Studies examining the role of social relationships in life satisfaction have portrayed a complex picture. While some findings suggest that the receipt of social support from others is associated with greater life satisfaction (Khodabakhsh, 2022), others report a negative association between the receipt of support and life satisfaction (Lowenstein et al., 2007) alluding to strain in the relationship or conditions that predispose individuals to both seek for help and harm their well-being at the same time.

The family unit, which includes both parents and children, is of profound importance throughout the lifespan, with the parent-child relationship being one of the most enduring and impactful bonds across the life course. As life expectancy increases, this relationship often extends into the parent's later years and the child's early older adulthood (Carr & Utz, 2020). Older parents and adult children frequently provide support to one another in various contexts, from caregiving to financial assistance (Fingerman et al., 2011; Tosi & Grundy, 2018).

While adult children are often a source of support for older parents, the relations may also be strained (Fingerman, 1996; van Gaalen and Dykstra, 2006). For instance, whereas providing support to adult children (especially emotional support) could be beneficial for older adults, the receipt of instrumental support has negative implications (Peng et al., 2019). Therefore, a third goal of this study is to examine how different aspects of the relationships between older adults and their adult children are longitudinally associated with their life satisfaction. We focus on both qualitative and quantitative aspects of the relations, examining perceived social support and strain and intergenerational contact, as studies demonstrated that these aspects show varied associations with parental outcomes (Segel-Karpas, 2023).

When examining relationships between parents and adult children, it is important to take into consideration the role of gender. Adult children often report feeling closer to their mothers than to their fathers (Swartz, 2009). Specifically, in comparison to any other gender-dyad, mothers and daughters often report the greatest emotional intimacy, though they also experience a high degree of strain (Fingerman, 2001; Smetana et al., 2003). However, the father-adult child relationship also varies in both positive and negative aspects, and these have been shown to have meaningful implications for the health and well-being of both generations (Polenick et al., 2016).

Mothers frequently tend to place a higher emphasis on their role as parents compared to fathers and express greater commitment to supporting their adult children, as well as clearly expressing their own support needs (Grigoryeva, 2017; Thomas et al., 2019). Furthermore, mothers tend to take responsibility for the quality of the relationship, blaming themselves when things go awry (Elliott et al., 2015). Finally, the perceived expectations from mothers to “be there for the children”, even when the relations are strained, could mean that they pay a higher emotional price for engaging with their children (Burke & Stets, 2012), emphasizing the need to examine contact with children, as well as the quality of relationships. Overall, mothers may be more susceptible to both the positive and negative aspects of the relationship with their children than fathers (Thomas & Umberson, 2018; Thomas et al., 2019). In line with these findings, the third goal is to explore potential differences between mothers and fathers in the effect that intergenerational relationships have on life satisfaction.

The current research

The study uses two waves of a large and representative dataset to model the effect of three facets within the parent–child relationship on older parents’ life satisfaction: social support, social strain, and contact frequency. These elements encompass both qualitative dimensions (support and strain) and a quantitative dimension (contact) of relationships, both of which warrant investigation, as existing research findings indicate that although children tend to maintain contact with their parents and offer support when necessary, the relationship itself may not be pleasant or satisfying (Lang & Schütze, 2002). We focus on life satisfaction in response to recent calls to examine the dyadic development of positive constructs (King et al., 2016) and add to the current literature by studying the role of gender in the context of parent–child relations in older adulthood.

Based on family systems theory that suggests interdependence between family members, we do not only propose that marital partners’ life satisfaction will be linked with one another, but also that one member’s relations with his or her children should have an effect on

his or her own life satisfaction, as well as on the partner's life satisfaction. Given previous findings concerning mothers' greater emotional investment in relations with adult children, we hypothesize that women's life satisfaction will be more closely linked to their relationship with children than men.

Based on the above, we formulated the following hypotheses:

H1: There are mutual influences in the life satisfaction of married men and women, such that changes in life satisfaction of one partner can be predicted by baseline level of the other partner 4 years earlier.

H2: Relationships with adult children contribute to older parents' life satisfaction, such that greater support and contact, and lower strain are associated with higher life satisfaction in both (a) own(b) partner.

H3: Women's life satisfaction is more strongly associated with their relationships with their adult children compared with men.

Method

Participants

This study utilized data from the Health and Retirement Study (HRS), which is a nationally representative investigation of individuals aged 50 and above, as well as their spouses. The HRS has been active since 1992 with the primary goal of examining the financial and health-related aspects of the older population in the United States. Data are collected every 2 years from adults aged 50 and older, as well as their spouses, regardless of their age. To maintain the sample's representative nature, new cohorts are periodically added.

Starting in 2006, the HRS team implemented a division within the sample, with one group completing a lifestyle and psychosocial questionnaire (referred to as the "leave-behind") during one wave and the other group doing so in the subsequent wave. This resulted in the creation of longitudinal data at four-year intervals.

The response rates for the leave-behind questionnaire were 87.7% in 2006 and 73.1% in 2010. This study specifically focused on a subset of 1065 married couples who met the inclusion criteria of being continuously married for 4 years and completing the leave-behind questionnaire both in 2006 and 2010. The HRS dataset is publicly accessible, but pre-registration is required. More details can be found at this link: <https://hrs.isr.umich.edu/>.

Measurements

Life satisfaction was measured using Diener et al. (1985) satisfaction with life scale. The scale consists of five items (for example: “in most ways my life is close to ideal”). In 2006 responses were rated on a 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 6 (“strongly agree”) scale, and in 2010 on a 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”) scale. Items were averaged to create the summary score ($\alpha=.884$ and $\alpha=.890$ for men and women, respectively, in 2006; $\alpha=.892$ for both men and women in 2010).

Support and strain from children were measured using three and four items, respectively (example for support: “How much do they (your children) really understand the way you feel about things?” and example for strain: “How often do they make too many demands on you?”). Each item is rated on a scale ranging from 1 (“not at all”) to 4 (“a lot”) $\alpha=0.764$ and $\alpha=0.779$ for husbands and wives, respectively, in 2006; $\alpha=0.746$ and $\alpha=0.761$ in 2010 for strain; $\alpha=0.819$ and $\alpha=0.828$ for husbands and wives in 2006, respectively; $\alpha=0.816$ and $\alpha=0.781$ for husbands and wives in 2010, respectively).

Contact was quantified by summing up respondents’ interactions with their children through three different means: a. face-to-face meetings, b. phone conversations, and c. e-mail exchanges or written correspondence. Each of these interactions was assessed using a scale that ranged from 1, indicating “less than once a year or never,” to 6, representing “three or more times a week.”

Age and race (1 = White, 0 = non-White) were used as covariates.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using Mplus vs. 8.6. To account for the dyadic structure of the data, we used Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) in the framework of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). SEM allows for the simultaneous estimation of actor effects (the effect of one’s predictors on his or her own outcome) as well as partner effects (the effect that one’s predictor exerts on their partner’s outcomes). In our case, it allowed us, for example, to examine how one’s relations with the children are not only associated with her or his life satisfaction but also the life satisfaction of one’s spouse. To examine the hypotheses, T2-dependent variable (life satisfaction) for both husbands and wives was simultaneously regressed on T1 own and partner’s life satisfaction (Step 1) and on T1 relationship indicators (support, strain, and contact) (Step 2). Husbands’ and wives’ T2 life satisfaction scores were allowed to correlate. We used Maximum Likelihood Robust estimation due to missing data. All estimates are reported using STDYX standardization. Age and race were added as covariates. Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) were

used to assess model fit. As a rule of thumb, RMSEA below than 0.05 and CFI and TLI above 0.95 are considered to indicate good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations between study variables are presented in Table 1. For both men and women, T2 life satisfaction is positively associated with life satisfaction of the other partner ($r = .34$, $p < .001$ for men, $r = .36$, $p < .001$ for women), support from children ($r = .20$, $p < .001$ for men; $r = .22$, $p < .001$ for women), and contact with children ($r = .07$, $p < .05$ for men; $r = .12$, $p < .001$ for women), and negatively associated with strain in the relationship with children ($r = -.15$, $p < .001$ for men; $r = -.22$, $p < .001$ for women).

To test the hypotheses, we used Structural Equation Modeling, and simultaneously tested the effect of the T1 predictors on men and women life satisfaction (Table 2). To test the first hypothesis, according to which each marital partner's life satisfaction is predicted by the other's life satisfaction in the previous wave, we regressed T2 men's and women's life satisfaction on own and other's life satisfaction at T1 (Step 1). Women's life satisfaction at baseline predicted men's life satisfaction 4 years afterward ($\beta = .18$, $p < .001$), above, and beyond one's own life satisfaction ($\beta = .46$, $p < .001$). Likewise, men's life satisfaction at baseline predicted women's life satisfaction 4 years afterward ($\beta = .13$, $p < .001$), above, and beyond one's own life satisfaction ($\beta = .47$, $p < .001$). Thus, H1 was supported. The model showed an excellent fit to the data ($\chi^2_{(4)} = 7.35$, $p = \text{ns}$; RMSEA = .02; CFI = .99; TLI = .98).

To test H2 (a), we regressed men and women's T2 life satisfaction on the three variables used to assess their own relations with children (Table 2, Step 2). Men's life satisfaction was only marginally significantly predicted by their perceived support from their children ($\beta = .06$, $p < .10$). Women's life satisfaction was significantly predicted by the support from children ($\beta = .09$, $p < .001$) and strain in the relationship ($\beta = -.06$, $p < .05$). The effects of contact were not significant. The model showed excellent fit to the data (CFI = .997, TLI = .992, RMSEA = .013, $\chi^2 = 11.76$, $p = .30$). In another analysis, we added partner effects to examine H2 (b), thus simultaneously testing men's relations with children as predictors of own *and* women's life satisfaction and vice versa. None of the partner effects were significant.

To test for the significance of gender differences, we ran the models while constraining the paths of interest and testing for significant changes in model fit based on the Sattora–Bentler scaled chi-square test. First, we tested gender differences in partner's life satisfaction effect on men's and women's life satisfaction. The constraint model did not significantly differ in fit, suggesting similarity in partner's effect on life satisfaction ($\Delta \chi^2 = 1.1889$, $p = .53$). Similarly, we found no significant difference in fit indices when constraining the effect of perceived support from children on life satisfaction, suggesting

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlation between study variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
(1) Age men	64.81	8.39													
(2) Age women	61.49	8.63	.79***												
(3) Race men	.85	.35	.12***												
(4) Race women	.86	.35	.11***	.13***											
(5) Support – men	3.14	.73	.20***	.14***	.78***										
(6) Support -women	3.31	.68	.14***	.19***	.01	.04									
(7) Strain – men	1.74	.60	-.17***	-.15***	-.05	.02	.34***								
(8) Strain – women	1.77	.62	-.19***	-.21***	-.06*	-.07*	-.41***	-.24***							
(9) Contact – men	11.42	2.95	-.03	.04	.08**	.08**	-.27***	-.41***	.43***						
(11) Contact – women	12.33	2.75	-.01	.02	.09***	.09***	.14***	.31***	-.08**	-.08**					
(12) T1 Life satisfaction – men	4.57	1.09	.15***	.16***	.09***	.09***	.27***	.14***	-.17***	-.17***	.11***	.06*			
(13) T1 Life satisfaction -women	4.65	1.12	.13***	.13***	.15***	.13***	.15***	.24***	-.15***	-.25***	.07*	.13***	.37***		
(14) T2 Life satisfaction – men	5.17	1.44	.11***	.13***	.08**	.07**	.20***	.12***	-.15***	-.14***	.07*	.04	.52***	.34***	
(15) T2 Life satisfaction -women	5.31	1.37	.04***	.06*	.11***	.11***	.15***	.22***	-.13***	-.22***	.11***	.12***	.30***	.51***	.36***

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Structural equation modeling for the effect of intergenerational relationships on life satisfaction in men and women

	Life satisfaction – men				Life satisfaction – women			
	Step 1		Step 2		Step 1		Step 2	
	β	se	β	se	β	se	β	se
Age men	0.1	.02	.01	.03				
Age women					-.02		-.04	.03
Race men	.002	.03	.009	.03				
Race women					.05		.05	.03
T1 Life satisfaction – men	.46***	.04	.44***	.04	.13***	.03	.12***	.03
T1 Life satisfaction –women	.18***	.23	.14***	.03	.47***	.03	.43***	.03
Support – men			.06+	.03				
Support –women							.09***	.04
Strain – men			.02	.03				
Strain – women							-.06*	.03
Contact – men			-.003	.03				
Contact – women							.02	.03

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

that the effect is similar for husbands and wives ($\Delta \chi^2 = 1.24$, $p = .45$). However, the effect of strain on life satisfaction seems to be marginally different for men and women, such that women are more susceptible to the negative implication of strain in the relationship with children for life satisfaction ($\Delta \chi^2 = 1.03$, $p = .06$). Finally, we constrained the path from support and strain to life satisfaction for women, finding that the constrained model had poorer fit to the data ($\Delta \chi^2 = 16.1985$, $p = .00001$), suggesting that support is more strongly associated with women's life satisfaction than strain.

Discussion

According to the socio-emotional selectivity theory, as individuals age, they tend to invest more in emotionally meaningful relationships than in those that have instrumental benefits. The selectivity that comes with age, ascribed to shrinking time horizons, suggests that older adults should be highly emotionally engaged in close family bonds, such as the relations with their spouses and, often, their adult children (Carstensen & Meeks, 2021; Hoppmann & Gerstorf, 2009).

The current study longitudinally examined the effects that marital and intergenerational relationships hold for older adults' life satisfaction while taking a gendered perspective. As expected, we found mutual effects in life satisfaction among married men and women. Our findings also indicate that the qualitative aspects of the relationship of married individuals with their children play a more significant role in life satisfaction than the quantitative aspects. While women's life satisfaction was significantly predicted by both support and strain in the relationship with their children, intergenerational contact predicted life satisfaction for neither men nor women. Probing gender

differences, only the relational strain differed in its effect on life between men and women, such that women were more susceptible to its deleterious outcomes. This is in line with previous studies and theoretical arguments, suggesting that women are usually more invested in their maternal role than men, and hence may be more adversely affected when the relations are strained (Thomas & Umberson, 2018; Thomas et al., 2019). The findings also suggest that for women, the positive effect of support is stronger than the adverse effect of strain. This finding is in some contradiction to Pierce and Quiroz's (2019) that found that while support from children did not directly influence a parent's positive or negative emotional state, parental emotional well-being was significantly affected by strain originating from their children. Overall, the study sheds light on the ways in which family relations are longitudinally linked to life satisfaction in older adulthood, and contribute to successful aging (Rowe & Kahn, 1997).

Despite its advantages that include relying on a large and representative sample of dyads of older adults, the study has several limitations that need to be addressed. First, the study is limited in that parents were asked about their "children" in general, and variation in the relationship between the children was not accounted for. Future research should collect data about each child in specific and compare mothers' and fathers' ratings for the specific child and their general rating of intergenerational relationships. Future research could also collect data from children and examine the dyadic perceptions of support, strain, and contact.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the literature that examines the possible consequences of intergenerational relationships by highlighting the differences between mothers and fathers and support, strain, and contact. The study further highlights the mutual effects between husbands and wives, stressing the need for a "full social picture" when assessing older adults' needs and wants. Practically, the study stresses the interdependence between family members by finding mutual effects between husbands and wives and by demonstrating the importance of relationships with adult children to older adults' life satisfaction. The results emphasize the need to take into consideration the parent-child relationship as a possible source for improving the life satisfaction of older adults. It also provides a source for optimism given the stronger impact relationship support with children has on mother's life satisfaction compared with relationship strain. As women's life satisfaction is more likely to be impacted by relationship strain than men's life satisfaction, it is possible that intergenerational relations should receive particular attention in the case of women.

The training of social workers usually acknowledges the important role of the family in individuals' health and mental health. However, not all social work programs pay sufficient attention to the role of family relationships in the second half of life. The present study can inform the training of social

workers by highlighting unique system characteristics in the second half of life. Gerontological social workers can also use these findings to design interventions that reduce strain and enhance support in relationships with adult children (Greene and Cohen, 2005). For instance, they could facilitate communication workshops aimed at improving parent–child interactions or develop family-based counseling sessions to address relational strain. Additionally, social workers might focus on supporting older mothers who appear more emotionally affected by strained relationships. These strategies align with the goal of promoting overall life satisfaction and well-being in older adulthood (Greene and Cohen, 2005).

Policy-wise, the present study highlights the importance of family systems in older adults' life satisfaction. Promoting family-centered support systems can be an important policy aim. This can be done through the support of caregivers and formal assistance in conflict resolutions within families. Women should receive specific attention and policy initiatives which foster family bonds and reduce intergenerational strain, but also spousal positive relations should be encouraged. Although much of the literature concerning policies to support family relations concentrates around elder care (Heller et al., 2007), it is important to note that not all family relationships form around the provision of informal care. Nonetheless, challenges faced by older adults due to various changes that take place at the system level should receive proper acknowledgment not only from practitioners but also from local and national policies that aim to support family relationships over the life span and facilitate successful aging.

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