How Grandparents Inform Our Lives: A Mixed Methods Investigation of Intergenerational Influence on Young Adults

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Abstract

While it is well documented that grandchildren benefit from strong, positive relationships with grandparents, less is known about the influence of these relationships as individuals establish their lives in early adulthood. Further, how this impact varies based on grandparent type (i.e., whether grandparents take on a "traditional" non-caregiving or "custodial" caregiving role) has not been investigated, despite the growing number of youth raised, at least in part, by their grandparents. Using an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, this study explores the influence of grandparent type during childhood on life satisfaction, perceived relationship quality, and life building in early adulthood. Descriptive and comparative analyses of survey data captured in the quantitative strand ($N = 94$) informed the subsample that completed semi-structured interviews in the emphasized qualitative strand ($N = 9$). The integrated findings revealed that past and present grandparent relationships remain salient in early adulthood, though the context and substance of these relationships is often nuanced with shifts over time and across individuals. Despite the importance of context, we failed to observe significant differences in life satisfaction or perceived relationship quality by grandparent type. Taken together, the findings suggest the substance of the relationship, more so than the structure, may be impactful for individuals building their life and reflecting on their values in early adulthood. In addition to elucidating areas for continued exploration, this work highlights the need for researchers and practitioners to consider variation in family structure when designing research and developing supports to reinforce positive, mutually beneficial grandparent–grandchild relationships.

Keywords Early adulthood · Life satisfaction · Explanatory sequential mixed methods design · Grandparent–grandchild relationship · Family processes · Well-being

Introduction

Shared experiences with family members, especially those from other generations, can build social cohesion and reinforce beliefs, norms, and values while creating space to explore identity in the context of one's family (Epp & Price, 2008; Istead & Shapiro, 2014). As individuals develop within a family system, relationships and experiences from childhood can have a lasting influence on perspectives and well-being throughout life, while also providing space for rich, reciprocal learning (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Thomas et al., 2017).

Increases in the average lifespan over the last several decades allow many individuals and their grandparents to enjoy a sustained, meaningful relationship into adulthood (Carstensen et al., 2015; Taylor et al, 2013). However, there is a lack of research on the influence of grandparent–grandchild relationships in early adulthood (i.e., roughly 22–35 years old) as individuals begin making more independent, high-stakes decisions about their personal and professional lives (e.g., pursuing a career, starting a family, etc.; Arnett, 2012; Hauser & Greene, 1991). One relational aspect thought to impact outcomes during the transition into adulthood is grandparent type (Ruiz & Silverstein, 2007; Scharf, 2016), or the role played by grandparents in the lives of youth. Grandparents can fill a non-caregiving role by engaging in what is often described as "traditional" grandparental involvement or a caregiving role by acting as one of their grandchild(ren)'s primary caregivers (Hayslip et al., 2019).

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The current study aims to develop a deeper understanding of the influence of grandparent type during childhood on life satisfaction, perceived relationship quality, and life building in early adulthood. This work focuses on young adults as they are increasingly able to integrate lessons learned throughout childhood into their own world view, evaluate the impact of grandparent type during childhood on their identity and well-being, and reflect on the interplay between their personal and family identities in a way that may not be likely earlier in life (Hauser & Greene, 1991; Thomsen & Vedel, 2019).

Grandparent Influence

While research supports the idea that grandparents are influential in their grandchildren's lives (Dunifon, 2013; Spalding & Carpenter, 2019), less clear is how, to what extent, and under what circumstances this influence is most salient (Dunifon et al., 2018). Most scholars agree that the influence of relationships with grandparents during childhood likely remains prominent into adulthood, though the effects of these relationships, both from childhood and in real-time during early adulthood, are not well studied (Li et al., 2018; Scharf, 2016; Taylor et al., 2013).

A recent branch of research investigates the relation between grandparent influence during childhood and adolescence on outcomes in early adulthood. This work suggests that grandparent involvement during childhood, conceptualized as amount of contact and emotional closeness, is positively linked to emotional development, cognitive functioning, and social adjustment in early adulthood and that lessons learned from grandparent–grandchild relationships in childhood, especially those related to spirituality and moral development, persist into early adulthood (Bengtson et al., 2018; Li et al., 2018; Wise, 2010).

While an increasing number of grandparents now have the ability to remain an active part of their adult grandchildren's lives (McDarby et al., 2021; Monserud, 2011), research on engagement between young adults and their living grandparents is not well developed. In general, an active, positive grandparent–grandchild relationship is linked to higher well-being for adult grandchildren (Moorman & Stokes, 2016; Sciplino & Kinshott, 2019; Thomas et al., 2017), with grandchildren in early adulthood often placing special value on relationships with their grandparents (Kemp, 2007; Manoogian et al., 2018). Though overall contact decreases during transitional years (Wetzel & Hank, 2020), the relationship can grow more emotionally close, with young adults often feeling a sense of respect and appreciation for their grandparents (Manoogian et al., 2018; Sciplino & Kinshott, 2019).

Grandparent Type

Within the broader literature and for the purposes of this study, we explore two primary grandparent types: non-caregiving and caregiving. Grandparents' roles may shift from non-caregiving to caregiving—and vice versa—over time, and grandparents can hold both roles simultaneously in relation to different grandchildren. Non-caregiving grandparents engage in relationships with their grandchildren, and, although they may provide support to their children and grandchildren, do not act as a primary caregiver to either (Hayslip et al., 2019). Differing levels of engagement, interest, and responsibility lead to heterogeneity in non-caregiving grandparents' experiences (Dunifon et al., 2018; Stelle et al., 2010).

Grandparent caregivers, or custodial grandparents, fill the role of primary caregiver to their grandchildren by providing substantial financial support and assuming the majority of caretaking responsibilities (Generations United, 2021). In relation to their grandchildren, grandparent caregivers often spend most of their time tending to household chores, providing financial support, caring for the children, and providing opportunities for learning (Dunifon et al., 2018; Hayslip et al., 2019). As in the case of the non-caregiving grandparent role, acting as a grandparent caregiver exists on a continuum, ranging from a grandparent providing instrumental support while the grandchild's parent(s) also remain involved to legally adopting their grandchild(ren) (Generations United, 2021).

Fundamental differences between the structure of adjacent-generation families with non-residential, non-caregiving grandparents and "grandfamilies" with grandparent caregivers as the heads of the household lead to functional differences and, subsequently, differential outcomes for children (Hayslip et al., 2019). Though available literature on young adults suggests strong intergenerational relationships broadly promote well-being (Thomas et al., 2017), few studies compare the effects of grandparent type during childhood on young adults, instead focusing on the relation between grandparent type and outcomes for children and adolescents.

Research on relationships between non-caregiving grandparents and their grandchildren suggests youth enjoy a range of positive cognitive, social, and emotional outcomes when grandparents are engaged throughout childhood and adolescence (Bates, 2018; Dunifon, 2013; Tanskanen & Danielsbacka, 2018). In general, children raised by their grandparents experience more stress and trauma than children in adjacent-generation families due to increased financial burden, social–emotional stress, and adverse physical and mental health outcomes (Choi et al., 2016; Hayslip et al., 2019). However, a growing

literature highlights grandparent resourcefulness as a defense against adverse emotional and psychological outcomes (Lee et al., 2015; Mendoza et al., 2020), with these efforts often leading to strong, close relationships during childhood and adolescence that are believed to persist into adulthood (Ruiz & Silverstein, 2007; Scharf, 2016).

The Current Study

Childhood experiences often influence outcomes in adulthood; in addition to myriad other family-level factors, experiences during childhood can vary considerably based on grandparent relationships (Thomas et al., 2017). Therefore, it is probable that differences in perceived grandparent relationship quality, life satisfaction, and approaches towards life exist for young adults as a function of their grandparent type during childhood. This study aims to illuminate aspects of past and present grandparent–grandchild experiences and relationship characteristics that may be important to foster or actively mitigate given outcomes in early adulthood and explores these concepts through the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of grandparent type during childhood on life satisfaction and perceived grandparent relationship quality in early adulthood?
2. How do relationships with grandparents inform the decisions individuals make about their lives in early adulthood?

Methods

The methodological framing for this work was an explanatory sequential case selection (Fig. 1). This mixed methods design approximates the complexity of developmental processes more precisely than either quantitative or qualitative methods alone and utilizes quantitative data to determine a qualitative sample (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Yoshikawa et al., 2008). After quantitative data collection and analysis, results were integrated to form a more complete picture of the phenomena of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This study emphasizes the qualitative strand as it allows for a deeper exploration into the substance and mechanisms at play in past and present relationships from

the perspective of young adult grandchildren. The study was approved by Clemson University's Institutional Review Board in July 2020.

Quantitative Strand

Sample

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling via online flyer distribution. Individuals were eligible for participation if they (a) were between twenty-two and thirty-five years of age at the time of data collection and (b) had a relationship with at least one grandparent during childhood. The sample consisted of 94 individuals in early adulthood from the United States, of which sixteen participants (17.02%) identified at least one grandparent that served as a primary caregiver for six months or longer during their childhood (Table 1).

Table 1 Quantitative sample characteristics

	Participants ($N = 94$) Mean (SD) or Percent (%)
Age (in years)	28.02 (3.45)
Gender	
Female	87.23%
Male	11.70%
Other	1.06%
Race/ethnicity	
White	91.49%
Black or African American	1.06%
Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino/a	4.26%
Multiracial	3.19%
Marital status	
Single	38.29%
Living with a partner	7.45%
Married	51.06%
Divorced	3.19%

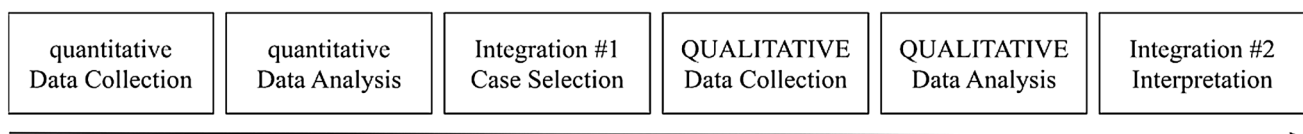| quantitative Data Collection	quantitative Data Analysis	Integration #1 Case Selection	QUALITATIVE Data Collection	QUALITATIVE Data Analysis	Integration #2 Interpretation

Fig. 1 Explanatory sequential (case-selection variant) mixed methods design

Data Collection

Participants completed a survey digitally through Qualtrics in 2020–2021. In addition to providing an initial, larger sample from which to draw participants for the qualitative strand, the quantitative data helped determine to what extent grandparent type, either non-caregiving or caregiving, during childhood is related to perceived grandparent relationship quality and life satisfaction in early adulthood. In addition to sociodemographic information, the survey included several measures to capture participants' current states in life, as well as experiences with their grandparents throughout childhood.

Grandparent Type I adapted two grandparent caregiver items from the AARP (2018) National Survey on Grandparenting to reflect grandchildren's (in place of grandparents') perspectives. For each listed grandparent, participants indicated whether they had ever been under their direct care for more than 6 months; those who indicated they had identified the amount of time (in years) spent under their direct care.

With increasing complexity in extended family networks (Carr & Utz, 2020), participants could report up to five grandparents they had during their childhood. This allowed inclusion of grandparents beyond parents' biological parents, regardless of direct lineage. However, after finding no meaningful differences between analyses including all reported grandparents and only biological grandparents, grandparent figures outside of the immediate non-adjacent generation (e.g., great-grandparents) and not of biological relation (e.g., step-grandparents) were excluded from analyses to ensure the scope of the study remained focused on those that filled the most direct grandparent roles. Sixty reported grandparents were removed as a result, leaving a total of 312 grandparents of 94 participants in the current analyses. The reported relations of grandparents for this sample included 50.32% mothers' parents and 49.68% fathers' parents.

Life Satisfaction The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) is an instrument designed to holistically capture life satisfaction. Participants responded to five items using a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from Strongly Agree (7) to Strongly Disagree (1). The SWLS had strong reliability in this sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.883$), is valid for use with young adults (Pavot & Diener, 1993), and can provide insight into the judgment component of young adults' subjective well-being, which acts as a gauge for how an individual views the world and their place in it (Pavot & Diener, 2013).

Perceived Grandparent Relationship Quality Participants rated perceived relationship quality during childhood and currently on a Likert-type item adapted from the National Survey on Grandparenting (AARP, 2018). For each listed grandparent, participants selected Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor in response to: "How would you rate the quality of your relationship with this grandparent during your childhood?" and "How would you rate the quality of your current relationship with this grandparent?".

Data Analysis

Summed SWLS items transformed into a SWLS composite (SWLSC) score, ranging from 5 to 35 (Diener, 2006). New variables for both perceived quality items (during childhood and currently) were created using average scores across grandparents. In seven instances (7.45%), participants did not report any living grandparents; because an average score could not be calculated, I excluded these participants from current quality analyses.

Using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 28, I ran descriptive statistics to observe trends and identify candidates for the qualitative sample. Then, I conducted comparative analyses to determine differences in life satisfaction and perceived relationship quality by grandparent type.

Qualitative Strand

Sample

From the pool of participants who expressed interest in an interview (25.53% of the quantitative sample), I selected individuals through maximal variation sampling (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Glesne, 2016). As a form of purposive sampling, maximal variation sampling allows the researcher to capture voices across the spectrum of the larger quantitative sample (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In this case, one way of looking at the sample was by grandparent type (either non-caregiving or caregiving), and another was across the continuum SWLSC scores (*over* and *under* one standard deviation from the sample mean; > 31.72 and < 20.18, respectively). The four categories were determined using these two criteria. Category 1 contained two participants, Categories 2 and 4 contained three participants, and Category 3 contained one participant (Table 2). Because quantitative results informed the qualitative sample, this was the first point of integration in this study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Data Collection

Interviews with participants from each category expounded on the quantitative results and explored similarities and differences in participants' experiences. The semi-structured phone and video interviews allowed participants to speak on their past and present experiences with grandparents

Table 2 Qualitative sample characteristics

	Age (years)	SWLSC Score	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Current family structure
Category 1					
Non-caregiving grandparents + life satisfaction over one SD from sample mean	$M = 31.5$	$M = 34.5$			
Madeline	32	35	Female	White	Married, no children
Emily	31	34	Female	White	Married, no children
Category 2					
Non-caregiving grandparents + life satisfaction under one SD from sample mean	$M = 28.67$	$M = 17.33$			
Lauren	33	20	Female	White	Married, no children
Fiona	23	17	Female	Bi-Racial	Single, no children
Danielle	30	15	Female	White	Married, no children
Category 3					
Caregiving grandparent(s) + life satisfaction over one SD from sample mean	$M = 25$	$M = 33$			
Nicole	25	33	Female	White	Married, 1 child
Category 4					
Caregiving grandparent(s) + life satisfaction under one SD from sample mean	$M = 27.67$	$M = 19.67$			
Sam	28	20	Male	White	Married, no children
Anne	27	20	Female	White	Single, no children
Britney	28	19	Female	White	Single, no children

and discuss how these interactions shaped development and perspectives about their lives (Glesne, 2016). Although the interview flow differed for each participant, all were asked the same questions (Appendix). After obtaining consent from participants, I recorded and transcribed the interviews verbatim and assigned pseudonyms; field notes and memos taken during the interviews were compiled within the transcript documents.

Data Analysis

I used an exploratory analytic approach, which allows emergent themes from the data to be identified without predetermined codes artificially limiting interpretations (Saldaña, 2015). First, I conducted an initial reading of all interview transcripts without assigning themes to refamiliarize myself with participants' backgrounds and responses while obtaining a general sense of the information conveyed through the data. Prevalent or potentially meaningful patterns within and throughout interviews were noted, with roughly thirty terms or phrases (e.g., "taking ownership," "relationship strain," "consistency," "turning points," etc.) emerging. After this initial stage, I coded interview data from each individual holistically to highlight salient themes then used pattern coding to compare these themes within categories (Saldaña, 2015). A second coder reviewed the themes to ensure reliability by independently assigning codes to the data based

on the themes generated in the previous step. There was strong intercoder reliability, with 77.27% of assigned themes being agreed upon initially and 100% agreement following discussion. Additionally, a research lab iteratively discussed the accuracy of terms and aided in theme refinement (Glesne, 2016); both techniques are acceptable methods to establish trustworthiness when a researcher independently analyzes data (Saldaña, 2015).

Results

Table 3 includes descriptive statistics. SWLSC scores did not differ significantly for participants with non-caregiving grandparents ($M = 26.15$, $SD = 5.74$) compared to those with at least one caregiving grandparent during childhood ($M = 24.94$, $SD = 6.02$; $t(92) = 0.766$, $p = 0.445$; $d = 0.21$). A similar pattern existed between average perceived relationship quality with grandparents during childhood for participants with non-caregiving grandparents ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.65$) compared to those with at least one caregiving grandparent during childhood ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.58$; $t(92) = -0.311$, $p = 0.758$; $d = 0.09$), along with current perceived relationship quality for participants with non-caregiving grandparents ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 0.94$) compared to those with at least one caregiving grandparent during

Table 3 Descriptive statistics

	All participants (N=94)	Non-caregiving grandparent group (n=78)	Caregiving grandparent group (n=16)
Time in grandparent's care (years)			
Mean	–	–	5.31 (5.22)
Range	–	–	1–18
Number of reported grandparents included in analyses	3.32 (0.83)	3.35 (0.85)	3.19 (0.75)
Satisfaction With Life Scale composite score (SWLSC)[†]			
Mean	25.95 (5.77)	26.15 (5.74)	24.94 (6.02)
Range	7–35	7–35	12–33
Quality of relationships in childhood*	3.31 (0.64)	3.31 (0.65)	3.36 (0.58)
Quality of relationships currently*	2.96 (0.92)	2.91 (0.94)	3.26 (0.79)

[†]25–35=Highly satisfied/Satisfied, 15–24=Slightly satisfied or dissatisfied; 5–14=Dissatisfied/Extremely dissatisfied; *4=Excellent, 3=Good, 2=Fair, 1=Poor

Table 4 Category themes

Category 1 "consistent"	Category 2 "distant"	Category 3 "grounding"	Category 4 "ambiguous"
Grandparents as consistency and support	Differences in relationship quality between grandparents	Challenging family dynamics with sets of grandparents	Tangible shifts in relationships
Additional "grandparents" at various points in life	Parents as tone-setters in the relationship	Growing into adult relationships with their grandparents	Taking ownership of relationships in adolescence/adulthood
Shifting to an adult relationship	Complicated relationships	Acknowledgement of influence	Nuanced relationships with grandparents
Grandparents influencing values	Taking ownership of relationships as adults	Connection to past and future orientation	Grandparents influencing trajectory

childhood ($M=3.26$, $SD=0.79$; $t(85)=-1.38$, $p=0.172$; $d=0.39$). All effect sizes were small to medium.

Table 4 presents major themes from the four categories explored in the qualitative strand.

Category 1: Non-Caregiving Grandparents + Life Satisfaction > 1 SD from Sample Mean

The relationships captured within Category 1 can best be described as "consistent." Common themes articulated by Category 1 participants included grandparents providing reliable support, additional "grandparents" at various points in life, shifting to an adult relationship, and grandparents influencing values.

Category 1 participants described their grandparents as consistent and supportive throughout their childhoods, while also acknowledging differences in grandparent relationships due to varying personalities, grandparenting styles, and circumstances. Participants expressed a closeness to one set of grandparents stemming from living in close geographic proximity; experiencing positive, cooperative relationships between their nuclear families and grandparents; and/ or retaining fond memories of spending time with their grandparents.

Beyond biological grandparents, additional grandparent figures fill this role for Category 1 participants. Emily described her father's stepmother as a "stand-in" grandparent. Additionally, both Madeline and Emily highlighted the joys of gaining new grandparents and grandchildren later in life through marriage. Madeline commented that her grandfather and husband are "kind of two peas in a pod in a lot of ways and that was really special to watch."

Participants in Category 1 noted shifts that allowed their relationships to become more bidirectional. Often, these shifts were accompanied by life transitions or developmental milestones, such as going away to college or moving to another state for a job. Madeline and Emily cited weekly communication with their grandparents via phone calls to overcome geographic distance, along with prioritized, in-person visits. In this way, participants expressed taking ownership of the relationship and engaging as equal partners with their grandparents.

Participants in Category 1 described how relationships with their grandparents impact their current values, especially the importance of family. This value is reflected in

Madeline's commitment to "be there for family." Emily also expressed her grandparents influencing her career: "With what I do now [in the public sector], that totally is impacted by my grandparents."

Category 2: Non-Caregiving Grandparents + Life Satisfaction < 1 SD from Sample Mean

The relationships captured within Category 2 can best be described as "distant." Common themes across Category 2 participants include substantive differences in relationship quality between grandparent sets, parents as tone-setters in grandparent–grandchild interactions, complicated relationships, and taking ownership of relationships with grandparents as adults.

Due to divorce, geographic separation, and grandparenting styles, Category 2 participants described richer, more fulfilling relationships with grandparents that provided more support throughout participants' childhoods. In many instances, sets of grandparents were juxtaposed against one another. For example, Danielle frequently used "opposite" when talking about a close bond shared with her paternal grandparents compared to the "formal" relationship with her maternal grandparents. The consistent, supportive relationships were not always filled with warm memories; participants described their grandparents' disengagement in connecting with young children. Lauren described being "very bored" when spending time with her paternal grandparents, who did not "do a lot of things to engage" her but instead let their grandchildren "just be." Fiona attributed her maternal grandparents' emotional distance to their older age, remarking that they were "caring" but not "hands-on." Danielle felt similarly about her maternal grandparents, commenting that "being the little kid grandparents was not a strength of theirs."

Category 2 participants highlighted the role of their mothers in grandparent–grandchild relationships. As gatekeepers for the relationship, parents have the power to obstruct or enable contact. A challenging relationship between her mother and maternal grandmother set the stage for Lauren to withdraw from the relationship as she entered adolescence and her grandmother's criticism, mirroring that which her mother endured, became more intrusive. For Fiona, two factors—her parents' soured relationship and her paternal grandparents siding with her father—caused a rift between her mother and paternal grandparents. Danielle's circumstances were similar, with her maternal grandparents "kicking [her] mom when she was down" following divorce. Their lack of support ultimately led Danielle's mother to nurture a stronger relationship with her ex-in-laws, leading to Danielle's closer connection with her paternal grandparents.

Though friction stemmed from challenging personality traits and behaviors, with descriptors like "judgmental," "superficial," "high maintenance," and "difficult" being used to characterize these grandmothers, each Category 2 participant articulated the nuances of engaging with their grandmothers. In the case of both Lauren and Fiona, their grandmothers' unabashed favoritism had a deleterious effect on the larger family system. Participants also described the impact of these grandmothers on their own personalities, with all three expressing tendencies towards their grandmothers' less desirable traits.

At important developmental milestones, such as the transition into adolescence or going away for college, participants in Category 2 made the realization that their grandparents are fallible humans and they, though grandchildren, had equal ownership over their relationships. A renewed sense of agency was expressed in different ways by participants. For Lauren, this took the form of a conscious resignation from her relationship with her grandmother when she was "old enough to make [her own] choices." As an adult, she now thoughtfully interacts with her grandmother on her own terms and is intentional about seeking out more meaningful connections with other individuals, such as her husband's grandparents. For Fiona, this insight allowed her to defend her younger sibling for dying their hair after vocal disapproval from her grandmother. For Danielle, ownership of the relationship involved acting as a caregiver for her grandfathers as their illnesses progressed, which ultimately brought her closer to both grandmothers.

Category 3: Caregiving Grandparent(s) + Life Satisfaction > 1 SD from Sample Mean

The relationships captured within Category 3 can best be described as "grounding." Common themes across Category 3 include challenging family dynamics, growing into adult relationships with grandparents, acknowledgement of grandparents' influence, and a connection to the past and future orientation in relation to family. In contrast to categories with multiple individuals eligible for inclusion in the qualitative strand, only one participant from the quantitative strand who expressed interest in a follow-up interview qualified for Category 3.

For the Category 3 participant, Nicole, half of her relationships with grandparents were characterized by strong emotional bonds; the other half were deemed much weaker and, at times, contentious. Nicole described one grandparent set as "cold" and "abrasive" when the relationship was tainted by stressors outside of her control. Nicole cites a lack of investment by her paternal grandparents and describes "not really know[ing] them much as a kid."

The Category 3 participant also noted how strong relationships with grandparents during her childhood, a consequence of being raised by these grandparents, blossomed into positive, bidirectional friendships as she matured.

Nicole described a deep respect for her maternal grandparents and a new perspective on "how good they've been" as she entered adulthood.

Relatedly, Nicole described her grandparent relationships influencing her core values, while also shaping her into the person she is today. In addition to "being a wife, being a mom," and "tak[ing] after [her] grandma and do[ing] things that she used to do," Nicole highlights her aspirations "to be how they were" and take on "certain character traits they had."

Another theme that emerged within this category was a strong sense of family identity, manifested through a simultaneous connection to the past and future orientation. In addition to small reminders of her maternal grandparents in everyday life, Nicole carried them into her future by naming her daughter after her maternal grandmother.

Category 4: Caregiving Grandparent(s) + Life Satisfaction < 1 SD from Sample Mean

The relationships captured within Category 4 can best be described as "ambiguous." Common themes across Category 4 include tangible shifts in relationships, taking ownership in adolescence and adulthood, nuanced relationships, and grandparents influencing their trajectory.

In addition to changes accompanying transitions into and out of their grandparents' care during childhood, Category 4 participants noted tangible shifts in their relationships. Anne details growing closer with her maternal grandmother as a young teenager following the passing of her cherished grandfather. Similarly, Britney re-engaged in relationships with her paternal grandparents when her grandfather became ill soon after she graduated from high school. Instead of a specific event, Sam outlines a shift as he developed spiritual beliefs departing from those of his family. As their relationship was heavily intertwined with the church community, Sam and his maternal grandmother began to drift apart, and their connection became tense.

Category 4 participants discussed points in their relationships with grandparents when they began to take ownership, often in late adolescence or adulthood. With some grandparents acting as primary caregivers, participants expressed relationship strain with other grandparents. In many cases, this required the participants to actively foster relationships with grandparents they did not live with. These relationships also hinged on participants' relationships with their parents and parents' relationships with the grandparents. As an adult, Sam built a relationship with his paternal grandmother and is intentional about visiting her after feeling their relationship was "distant" and "casual" during his childhood. Anne expressed the need to consciously choose

which relationships to pursue; she continues to engage with her maternal grandmother and is building a connection with her paternal grandmother. However, due to "family dynamics stuff that's split [her] apart" from her stepfather's parents, who were a consistent and positive presence throughout Anne's childhood, she "doubt[s] [they] will really interact much ever again."

Nuanced grandparent relationships brought forth appreciation for the care provided by grandparents but also hurt and pain. Each Category 4 participant noted wrestling with this contradictory phenomenon, but ultimately found both can be true. For Sam, this juxtaposition was most salient as he spoke of his relationship with his maternal grandmother, describing her as a "loving authoritarian." While acknowledging the sacrifices she made to care for him during childhood and citing her as the grandparent he remains closest with, Sam also felt off-put by certain beliefs held by his grandmother, not only about the world at large but also about him specifically (e.g., when his grandmother told him he was "hard to love"). Anne expressed frustration with her maternal grandmother's tendency to overstep boundaries by probing into Anne's life, noting her grandmother's interest "com[es] from a loving space, but sometimes can really be a lot." Though more stable now, Britney's relationship with her paternal grandparents frayed after living with them. With her grandparents taking on both parental and grandparental roles throughout her life, expectations in the relationship became difficult to disentangle.

Though perceived impacts differed in substance, Category 4 participants noted the ways in which their grandparents influenced their life trajectories. While Anne and Britney highlighted aspects of their grandparents' personalities and values that affected their own priorities (e.g., "show[ing] up for people," valuing security and self-sufficiency), Sam generally used his grandparents as a model to diverge from. He explained that, although he is indebted to his grandparents—especially his maternal grandmother—for keeping him "alive," he is also fueled by a desire "to do better." Conscious decisions, like moving away to advance his education and avoiding having children at a young age, contrast with his family's history.

Discussion

This mixed methods study investigated the influence of grandparent relationships on life satisfaction, perceived relationship quality, and life building in early adulthood while exploring differences between individuals with non-caregiving and caregiving grandparents.

Connection Between Grandparent Type, Life Satisfaction, and Relationship Quality

Clearly formed relations between grandparent type, life satisfaction, and perceived grandparent relationship quality do not appear to exist within this sample. Though the average SWLSC score was lower (though not statistically significant) for those with a grandparent caregiver ($M = 24.94$) compared to those with solely non-caregiving grandparents ($M = 26.15$) during childhood, participants with a grandparent caregiver rated their current relationships with grandparents higher ($M = 3.26$) than counterparts with non-caregiving grandparents ($M = 2.91$).

These findings contradict previous hypotheses that individuals with grandparent caregivers would have lower well-being than those with non-caregiving grandparents. In general, children raised by grandparent caregivers are at a higher risk of developing depressive symptoms due to the potentially greater number of adverse childhood experiences that may lead them to be in their grandparent's care (Dolbin-MacNab et al., 2021; Hayslip et al., 2019). The lack of large differences in life satisfaction across the two groups may suggest grandparent caregivers actually act as a buffer for their grandchildren, though the small and uneven subsamples limit anything more than speculating on this trend. Recent studies highlight the resourcefulness and resilience of grandparent caregivers (e.g., Dolbin-MacNab et al., 2021; Mendoza et al., 2020), though their ability to mitigate negative long-term outcomes for their grandchildren has not been investigated. While similar scores between those with caregiving and non-caregiving grandparents provide promise, the unbalanced, small samples do not allow for conclusive statements regarding this observation. Though not substantially different, the finding that young adults with caregiving grandparents, on average, rated the quality of their current relationships with grandparents more positively than their counterparts with non-caregiving grandparents aligns with Ruiz and Silverstein's (2007) hypothesis that grandchildren raised by grandparents enjoy close relationships after entering adulthood due to the intimate, parental relationship during childhood.

Drawing on the qualitative results, it is also clear that dynamics within the larger family system can impact young adults' relationships with their grandparents. For participants in both grandparent type groups, parents often set the tone for the grandparent–grandchild relationship by modeling patterns of interaction throughout participants' lives. This finding aligns with research suggesting family satisfaction acts as a mediator between young adults' perceived grandparent roles and life satisfaction (Miguel et al., 2021) and parents play a critical role in the grandparent–adult grandchild relationship (Monserud, 2011).

Differences in relationship quality and shifts in individual relationships over time noted in the qualitative results may point to intergenerational ambivalence, or simultaneously holding positive and negative sentiments towards those from another generation (Suitor et al., 2011). Often discussed in relation to grandparents' feelings towards grandchildren (e.g., von Humboldt et al., 2019), the present findings reveal that some young adults may feel generally ambivalent about grandparents given different experiences across time and individual relationships. Intergenerational ambivalence may be fitting given the nuance described by participants within and across relationships with grandparents, a likely inevitable circumstance when considering changes over the life course and sociohistorical context (Fingerman et al., 2020).

Influence of Grandparents in Early Adulthood

All participants were conscious of the impact their grandparents have on their values and subsequent decisions regarding careers, life partners, child-rearing, and perspectives on functioning in the world. Despite variation in the structure and substance of grandparent relationships held by participants—a level of diversity that is expected both within and across family systems (Moorman & Stokes, 2016; Stelle et al., 2010)—the acknowledgement of their grandparents' influence was interspersed throughout the interviews.

Learning and development occur within the context of one's relationships with others (Vygotsky, 1978), and the family context is a setting that may remain prominent throughout one's life. Within this sample, having more reciprocal, nurturing past and present relationships with grandparents seemed to be linked to a greater influence on life building in early adulthood compared to having less intentional or disengaged relationships. Having a bidirectional, equal relationship with at least one grandparent was often an important marker of a positive influence, aligning with the previous research suggesting grandparents can take on the role of friend in relationships with their adult grandchildren (MaloneBeach et al., 2018). In some instances, like for the Category 3 participant who frequently expressed instances of ambivalence in relationships with grandparents, a sense of assurance in a positive grandparent relationship safeguarded against negative interactions in more challenging grandparent relationships.

In most cases, reciprocal, adult relationships emerged as participants grew older and shifted into the role of co-collaborator or agent. While empowering and positive in most cases, some participants, especially those in Category 2, reported their ability to assert themselves also led to confrontation. In their work on turning points in the grandparent–grandchild relationship from an adolescent's perspective, Bangerter and Waldron (2014) identified over one-hundred unique turning points. The inevitability of

shifts in the relationship and the variation in outcomes found in the current study align with the conclusion that there is extensive diversity in the grandparent–grandchild relationship and the ways in which grandparent–grandchild bonds change over time (Bangerter & Waldron, 2014; Manoogian et al., 2018; Stelle et al., 2010).

Interestingly, instances where grandparents passed away before participants had an opportunity to build an adult relationship did not seem to have a definitively negative influence on life satisfaction, suggesting an adult relationship may not act as a "prerequisite" for being generally satisfied with life. However, the overall well-being of participants with grandparents who passed away before they entered adulthood did seem to be buttressed by having appreciation for their grandparents' contributions. Characteristics, memories, and lessons related to these grandparents remained prominent as the young adults made decisions about their lives. These results echo previous research in which gratitude, respect, and appreciation were found to be significant factors in the well-being of young adults, a finding which holds across grandparent types (Lantz et al., 2021; Manoogian et al., 2018; Sciplino & Kinshott, 2019).

Common across individuals in the categories with life satisfaction scores over one standard deviation from the sample mean was a value of family. More specifically, these participants held the general feeling that their grandparents influenced who they became, what they value, and how they operate in the world. In the face of challenging family dynamics, these participants cited lessons learned from their grandparents as significant building blocks in their current perspectives on life. Previous research suggests that strong grandparent–grandchild bonds lead to greater sense of stability and well-being, often influencing young adults' values (Kemp, 2007; Taylor et al., 2013). In contrast, participants in the categories with life satisfaction scores under one standard deviation from the sample mean were more likely to discuss their grandparents' influence in terms of "what not to do" or "how not to be" as they are building their life in adulthood. Participants in these categories cited specific character traits or behaviors of their grandparents which they felt would be detrimental to the life they want for themselves.

Participants across categories commented on the difficulty of watching grandparents age and, unfortunately, losing grandparents. Though grandchildren today are afforded the chance to continue relationships with their grandparents longer into their own lives, the implications of being an adult and losing a close family member—especially circumstances in which the grandchild provides some form of care—can be challenging and put values into perspective (Manoogian et al., 2018). With this study being conducted amid a global pandemic, many participants discussed the emotional difficulty of being physically separated from grandparents, especially those with progressing illnesses (e.g., dementia,

cancer). Many participants maintained regular, and at times even increased, contact with their grandparents as a result of the pandemic, a finding which aligns with COVID-19-related research (McDarby et al., 2021).

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

As is common with research in this area (e.g., Sciplino & Kinshott, 2019), the study design only allowed for retrospective accounts from participants regarding perceptions of their past relationships with grandparents. Because the design is not longitudinal, it is not possible to identify causal pathways between past experiences with grandparents and outcomes (e.g., life satisfaction, perceived relationship quality) in early adulthood. The field would benefit from studies that follow grandparent–grandchild relationships over time and collect quantitative and qualitative data at multiple time points to provide more "snapshots" across the lifecourse. Notwithstanding these areas of improvement, most participants in the qualitative sample of this study seemed to explain their relationships with a level of clarity, providing thoughtful reflections of their relationships with grandparents throughout childhood and adolescence and into early adulthood when applicable.

Like other studies in this area employing convenience sampling (e.g., Lantz et al., 2021; McDarby et al., 2021), the quantitative—and subsequently qualitative—sample lacks demographic diversity, with most participants identifying as female and white. An additional issue with the convenience sampling method used in recruitment is selection bias; individuals feeling more strongly about their grandparents, either positively or negatively, may have been more inclined to voluntarily participate. This may be especially true for the qualitative sample, where participant selection was limited to those who consented to follow-up contact.

It is important to note that the findings are not intended to be generalizable; emphasis on the qualitative strand supported the goal for depth, not breadth, with the included accounts provided as examples. Similarly, while maximal variation sampling created four distinct categories, the average SWLSC scores did not vary considerably between the categories as criteria were highly selective. Though spanning three levels, all scores for the qualitative strand participants were considered slightly below average, average, and above average (Diener, 2006). Future research should be more systematic in selecting participants and consider individuals scoring far below average on the SWLS.

The small number of individuals with grandparent caregivers during childhood that were included in the quantitative strand, and subsequently the selection pool for the qualitative strand, is a significant weakness. This is an issue within the field and may explain the paucity of empirical

research on adults who were raised by grandparents, with the exception of a small set of studies (e.g., Lantz et al., 2021). There was also considerable variation in the experiences of individuals in the third and fourth categories, with some participants recognizing their grandparent as primary caregiver while continuing to reside with their parents and some being dependent solely on their grandparents for years; existing research often fails to acknowledge that grandparent caregiving exists on a continuum (Generations United, 2021). The type of primary care and duration, along with other family dynamics at play, contribute to the wide array of experiences within this subset of the population. Understanding the long-term effects of these differences is an area that needs additional research. Despite targeted recruitment and millions of young adults in the United States currently falling within this category (Fuller-Thomson et al., 1997; Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005), it was difficult to find individuals that met the inclusion criteria and were willing to participate. Future work should consider mechanisms to systematically identify and follow individuals raised by a grandparent to advance research on this steadily growing subset of the population. Millions of children belong to this group; with membership growing rapidly, they deserve to be heard.

Conclusion

Past and present relationships with grandparents can have a lasting impact. This study sought to develop a deeper understanding of the effects of the grandparent relationship on life satisfaction, perceived grandparent relationship quality, and life building in early adulthood. The explanatory sequential design and emphasized qualitative strand allowed for a focus on gaining a deeper understanding of intergenerational relationships. Additionally, this work begins to address a lack of research in the field related to diverse family structures through the incorporation of grandparent caregivers, and thus "grandfamilies." Taken together, the findings suggest that, regardless of grandparent type, the substance of grandparent–grandchild relationships throughout the life course may be impactful for grandchildren in early adulthood. While acknowledging differences within and across grandparent–grandchild relationships, researchers and practitioners should consider ways to encourage strong relationships using current adult grandchildren's perspectives as a guide for the development of resources, programs, and supports.

Ultimately, this study confirms that multigenerational family systems are abundant in variation. This is increasingly the case as diversity in family structures (e.g.,

blended families, grandparent-headed families, same-sex couples having children, etc.) grows; the experiences of participants in this study highlight this. Having theoretical structures and nuanced methodologies for approaching this work is essential, and developing a more complete understanding of the influence of grandparents on the lives young adults are building, and their satisfaction within these lives, is critical for ensuring the well-being of all generations—not just the young adults themselves, but also their grandparents, parents, children, and future grandchildren.

Appendix: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Participant Name   Date

Thank you for your participation in this research study. This interview is expected to take between 20-30 minutes. You can choose not to answer any question and can stop the interview at any time. Is it okay if I record our conversation? The recorded audio will not be shared with anyone.

[If yes, begin recording and start interview.]   *[If no, start interview.]*

1. Walk me through a typical experience with your grandparents during your childhood. *Additional Prompts*: What age are you in this experience? Why is it meaningful or memorable?
2. Overall, describe your relationship with your grandparents during your childhood.
3. Do you still have a relationship with your grandparents? How has it shifted over time?
4. In your own words, how has your relationship with your grandparents, either throughout childhood or currently, influenced you? *Additional Prompts*: How has it impacted aspects of your life now, such as a) Relationships, b) Career, c) Values and beliefs

This is the end of the interview. Thank you for your participation. All responses you've provided today will remain anonymous. I will attach a unique pseudonym to your responses to protect your identity. Do you have a suggested or preferred pseudonym to be used?

Post-Interview Notes

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author did not receive financial support for the submitted work, and the authors have no competing interests to disclose.

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